

# **Salim kepada Guru as Experiential Learning: Cultivating Respect, Love, and *Tawadhu'* among Primary School Students in Indonesia**

**Taufikin**

Institut Agama Islam Negeri Kudus, Indonesia

**Email :** [taufikin@iainkudus.ac.id](mailto:taufikin@iainkudus.ac.id)

## **Abstract**

This study examines the practice of *salim* as an experiential form of character education in Indonesian primary schools. While character education is often approached through cognitive instruction and formal programs, this research explores how moral values are internalized through lived interaction embedded in school culture. Using a qualitative ethnographic design, the study was conducted over four years in three primary schools in Demak Regency, involving teachers, students, and parents as participants. Data were collected through prolonged participant engagement, in-depth interviews, documentation, and reflective field notes, and analyzed thematically to capture recurring patterns of meaning. The findings reveal that *salim* functions as a holistic pedagogical practice that cultivates *adab*, strengthens emotional relationships, and develops *tawadhu* through repeated, embodied interaction. Rather than operating as a symbolic gesture, *salim* becomes a medium through which respect, care, and humility are enacted and gradually internalized. The study highlights that character formation emerges from sustained social practice rather than isolated instruction. These findings suggest the importance of recognizing culturally grounded practices as meaningful pathways for character education, offering an alternative approach that integrates behavioral, emotional, and spiritual dimensions within everyday learning environments.

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## INTRODUCTION

Character education in primary schools has increasingly become a central concern in contemporary educational discourse, particularly in contexts where moral development is often reduced to cognitive instruction rather than lived experience (Hołub, 2023; Madjar, 2020; Sukidin et al., 2022). In many educational systems, character formation is still approached through abstract teaching, moral explanation, and formalized programs that do not fully engage students' emotional and embodied dimensions (Eaude, 2015; Pawl & Schnitker, 2022; Phelps & Brown, 2023). This tendency becomes more visible in rapidly modernizing societies, where traditional practices are often marginalized despite their potential pedagogical value. Within the Indonesian context, however, certain culturally embedded practices continue to operate as informal yet powerful modes of character formation (Fathurohman et al., 2022; Nugroho & Triana, 2021; Syzdykova et al., 2023). One such practice is *salim*, a gesture in which students respectfully greet teachers by shaking hands, bowing slightly, and kissing the teacher's hand (Carfi & Mastrogiovanni, 2023; Risdadi et al., 2023; Salim & Dawwd, 2019). While often perceived as a routine cultural norm, this practice represents a meaningful site of moral interaction that integrates respect, emotional connection, and spiritual awareness within everyday school life.

Recent studies on character education have highlighted the limitations of approaches that emphasize cognitive moral reasoning without sufficient attention to experiential and affective dimensions. Research by Brown et al. (2023) demonstrates that effective character education requires the integration of action, emotion, and reflection rather than reliance on instructional delivery alone. Similarly, Mammen & Paulus (2023) argue that moral development is deeply shaped by social interaction and lived experience, rather than abstract knowledge. Within the framework of experiential learning, Wijnen-Meijer (2022) emphasizes that learning occurs through cycles of concrete experience, reflection, and application, suggesting that moral values are more effectively internalized when they are enacted in real contexts. In the field of Islamic education, several studies have explored the importance of adab and moral conduct, particularly in relation to teacher-student relationships (Isyraqi Jamil, Zulfahmi & Kadir, 2021; Musthofa et al., 2023; Rahman & Solarim, 2022). However, much of this literature remains conceptual, with limited empirical investigation into how everyday practices function as lived pedagogical processes.

Despite these contributions, a significant gap remains in understanding how culturally embedded practices operate as mechanisms of experiential character formation in real educational settings. Existing studies tend to focus either on theoretical models of moral education or on formal programs implemented within institutional frameworks. There is still limited attention to how routine, embodied practices contribute to the internalization of moral values through repeated interaction.

In particular, the role of simple, everyday gestures such as *salim* has not been sufficiently examined as a site of integrated moral learning that combines behavioral, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. This gap is especially relevant in the context of Islamic primary education, where traditional practices continue to coexist with modern educational demands.

This study aims to address this gap by examining the practice of *salim* as a form of experiential learning in character education. Specifically, the study seeks to explore how *salim* functions as a lived pedagogical practice that cultivates adab, strengthens emotional relationships, and develops tawadhu among students. By focusing on everyday interaction rather than formal instruction, this study provides a deeper understanding of how character formation occurs through embodied experience within school culture. The findings are expected to contribute both to the theoretical development of experiential learning in moral education and to practical approaches that integrate cultural practices into contemporary educational contexts.

Building on this objective, the study advances the argument that character education cannot be fully understood without examining the role of lived practice in shaping moral awareness. Rather than treating moral values as abstract concepts to be taught, this study positions *salim* as an experiential process through which values are enacted, felt, and internalized. Through this lens, character formation is understood as a dynamic process that emerges from repeated interaction, emotional engagement, and embodied behavior. The following section outlines the methodological approach used to capture these processes within their natural context.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with an educational ethnographic design to explore the lived practice of *salim* as a form of experiential learning in character formation (Heinrich & Green, 2020; Quibrantar & Ezezika, 2023; Unkule, 2023). The ethnographic orientation was selected to capture the depth of everyday interactions, meanings, and values embedded within the school culture, particularly those that cannot be accessed through short-term observation. The study was conducted in three primary schools in Demak Regency, namely SD Negeri Harjowinangun 02, SD Sidomulyo 1, and SD Merak 1, all of which consistently maintain the practice of *salim* as part of their daily routines. These sites were selected purposively based on their sustained implementation of the practice and their relevance to the research focus (Ames et al., 2019; Bakkalbasioglu, 2020; Campbell et al., 2020). Participants included teachers, students, and parents, allowing the study to capture multiple perspectives and construct a more comprehensive understanding of how *salim* operates within the social and moral fabric of the school environment.

Data were collected through prolonged engagement in the field, combining participant observation, in-depth interviews, documentation, and researcher reflective notes. The observation process extended over four years, enabling the researcher to capture patterns of interaction in a natural and evolving context rather than as isolated events. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' emotional experiences, interpretations, and reflections related to the practice of *salim*. Documentation, including photographs and video recordings, was used to support data triangulation and to capture non-verbal expressions that might not emerge through interviews alone. The researcher maintained an active yet reflexive role throughout the study, engaging with participants while continuously reflecting on positionality and interpretation (Folkes, 2023; Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019; Kamlongera, 2023). The distribution of research participants and their roles in the study are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Research Informants and Their Roles**

<b>Informant Category</b>	<b>Role in Study</b>	<b>Contribution</b>
<b>Teacher</b>	<b>Classroom practitioners</b>	<b>Insight into the implementation and pedagogical meaning of <i>salim</i></b>
<b>Student</b>	<b>Primary participants</b>	<b>Lived experiences and emotional responses toward <i>salim</i></b>
<b>Parent</b>	<b>Supporting actors</b>	<b>Reinforcement of values and practices of <i>salim</i> in the home environment</b>

Following this, credibility of the findings was ensured through prolonged engagement, triangulation of data sources, and iterative verification of emerging interpretations across different participant groups. Data analysis followed a thematic approach inspired by Braun and Clarke, supported by NVivo 12 to manage and organize the dataset systematically (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). The process began with familiarization through repeated reading of field notes and interview transcripts, followed by the generation of initial codes that captured meaningful units of data. These codes were then organized into broader categories and progressively developed into interpretive themes that reflected recurring patterns across the dataset. The analysis remained grounded in the data while being sensitively informed by the conceptual lens of experiential learning and *adab al-ta'allum*. Rather than imposing theory onto the data, the analytical process allowed themes to emerge organically and then be interpreted in relation to existing frameworks. This approach enabled the study to produce a nuanced understanding of *salim* as a lived pedagogical practice that integrates action, emotion, and moral meaning within everyday school life (Clement & Welch, 2021; Goldschmidt-Gjerløw & Trysnes, 2020; Rinne, 2020).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Result

the context of this study, *salim* refers to a culturally embedded practice in Indonesian Islamic schools in which students greet their teachers by respectfully shaking hands, slightly bowing, and kissing the teacher's hand as a sign of reverence and acknowledgment. This gesture is not merely a form of etiquette, but represents a lived expression of moral values rooted in respect, humility, and relational awareness. Within the observed school environment, *salim* emerges as a routine yet meaningful interaction that carries both social and moral significance.

### Cultivating Adab through the Practice of Salim

The practice of *salim* functions as a culturally grounded mechanism for cultivating adab among primary school students. Within the observed school context, *salim* represents a lived moral practice that shapes students' attitudes toward teachers through repeated interaction. Students greet teachers respectfully, bow slightly, and kiss the teacher's hand before entering the classroom. These actions become routine behaviors that gradually form habits of politeness and respect. The practice is not introduced as a formal rule but emerges as part of everyday school culture. Through repetition, students develop awareness of respectful conduct toward teachers as sources of knowledge and moral guidance. This experiential process allows students to internalize moral values through action rather than verbal instruction. Consequently, *salim* becomes a meaningful pedagogical practice that fosters respectful relationships between students and teachers.

Interview findings indicate that the practice of *salim* is understood as a meaningful expression of respect toward teachers. One teacher explained: "We never force students to perform *salim*. They themselves feel that something is missing if they do not do it." This statement suggests that students perform *salim* voluntarily, reflecting internalized respect. Similarly, a student described the meaning of *salim*: "When I perform *salim*, I feel like I am respecting my own parents. Teachers are sources of knowledge, so they must be honored." Another teacher further emphasized the educational purpose of the practice: "*Salim* is not merely a cultural habit, but a way for us to teach adab." In addition, teachers also described *salim* as part of character formation: "Every day we remind students to perform *salim*, not as an obligation, but as a good habit that educates them."

Based on the interviews, the practice of *salim* reflects a shared understanding between teachers and students regarding respectful behavior. Teachers intentionally maintain the practice as part of school culture, while students perceive *salim* as a natural expression of respect. This alignment indicates that *salim* functions as a collective moral practice rather than a formal rule. Students' voluntary participation suggests that respect toward teachers has

been internalized through repeated experience. Teachers' explanations also indicate that salim is used to cultivate polite behavior and respectful communication. The repetition of the practice contributes to habit formation and strengthens moral awareness.

Field findings indicate that the practice of salim was consistently carried out every morning before students entered the classroom. Students lined up and greeted teachers respectfully while slightly bowing and kissing their hands. The atmosphere during this interaction appeared calm, orderly, and respectful, reflecting a shared understanding of the importance of the practice. In addition, students were also seen performing salim outside formal routines. When encountering teachers in hallways, school yards, or near classroom entrances, students approached them spontaneously to perform salim without being instructed. Documentation in the form of photographs and video recordings further showed students maintaining polite posture, smiling, and demonstrating respectful body language during the interaction. Moreover, students who arrived late were observed actively seeking teachers before entering the classroom to perform salim. These findings suggest that the practice of salim had become embedded in daily school life and functioned as a personal moral commitment rather than merely a procedural activity. Building upon these field findings, the patterns of adab cultivation embedded in the practice of salim can be systematically classified based on forms of interaction, behavioral expressions, and levels of internalization, as presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Thematic Classification of Salim Practices in Cultivating Adab**

<b>Category of Practice</b>	<b>Specific Forms of Salim Practice</b>	<b>Behavioral Characteristics Observed</b>
<b>Routine-Based Practice</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Performing salim before entering the classroom</li> <li>• Greeting teachers at the school gate</li> </ul>	Students line up, wait their turn, and approach teachers in an orderly manner
<b>Gesture-Oriented Practice</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slight bowing while greeting</li> <li>• Hand-kissing gesture</li> <li>• Lowering body posture</li> </ul>	Movements are performed gently, with controlled body language and calm expression
<b>Spontaneous Interaction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Performing salim when meeting teachers outside class</li> <li>• Initiating greeting without instruction</li> </ul>	Students approach teachers voluntarily in informal settings such as corridors or school yard
<b>Value-Driven Behavior</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeking teachers to perform salim when arriving late</li> <li>• Feeling incomplete without salim</li> </ul>	Students demonstrate awareness and personal initiative toward the practice

The classification presented in Table 1 reveals that the practice of salim operates through a layered process of moral formation that extends beyond routine behavior into internalized ethical awareness. The progression from structured routines to spontaneous interactions indicates that students do not merely perform salim as a procedural act, but gradually appropriate it as a personal moral orientation. The presence of gesture-oriented practices further demonstrates that respect is not only cognitively understood but also embodied through disciplined physical expression. More importantly, the emergence of value-driven behaviors, such as actively seeking teachers to perform salim, reflects a shift from external compliance to internal commitment. This pattern suggests that the practice functions as a sustained mechanism of character formation in which repeated action fosters moral consistency. The table therefore substantiates that adab is cultivated not through isolated instruction, but through continuous engagement, habituation, and meaningful social interaction within the school environment.

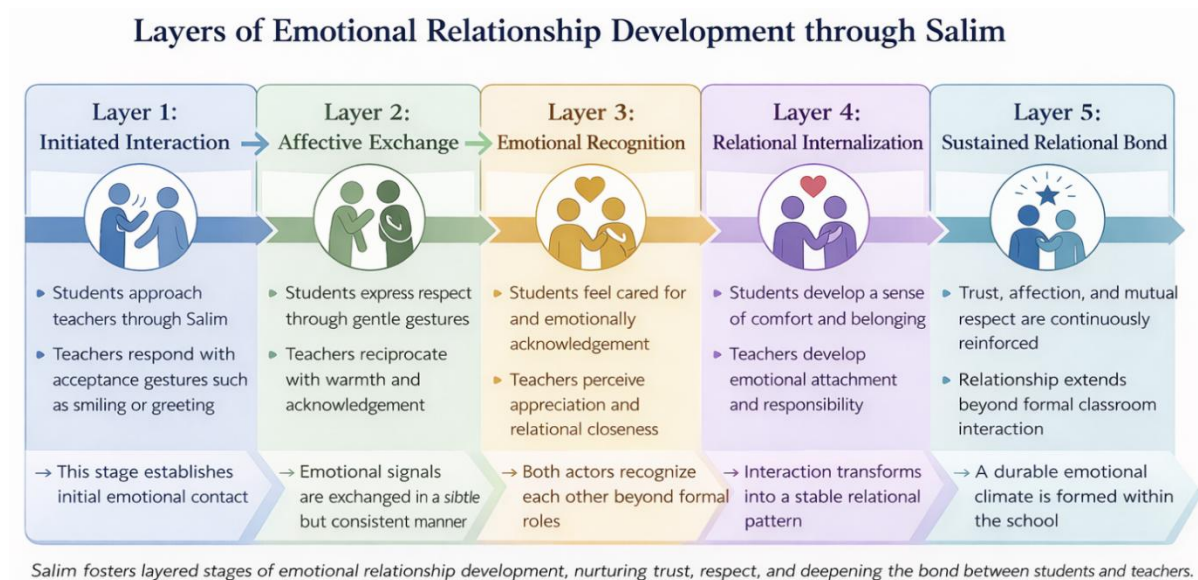
### **Strengthening Emotional Relationships through Salim**

The practice of salim functions as an affective interaction that strengthens emotional relationships between students and teachers within the school environment. Beyond its role as a gesture of respect, salim creates a space for emotional exchange that fosters feelings of closeness, care, and mutual recognition. Through repeated daily interaction, students experience a sense of warmth and acceptance, while teachers perceive appreciation and emotional connection from their students. This reciprocal interaction contributes to the development of a positive relational climate that supports learning and character formation. The act of salim allows students to express respect in a way that is emotionally meaningful rather than merely symbolic. Over time, this interaction shapes students' sense of belonging and emotional security in school. Therefore, salim becomes an experiential medium through which emotional bonds are formed, maintained, and strengthened, contributing to a relational dimension of character development grounded in everyday school practices.

The interview findings indicate that salim functions as an affective bridge that connects students and teachers through shared emotional experiences. Teachers interpret salim as a form of appreciation that evokes feelings of warmth and emotional attachment, while students perceive it as a source of comfort and care. This reciprocal perception suggests that salim facilitates a two-way emotional exchange rather than a one-sided expression of respect. The repetition of this interaction contributes to the formation of stable emotional relationships within the school environment. Students' expressions of calmness and comfort indicate that salim provides emotional reassurance, which supports their sense of belonging. At the same time, teachers' responses reflect increased emotional engagement with students. These findings demonstrate that emotional

connection is not incidental but embedded within the practice itself. Through continuous interaction, salim strengthens relational trust and reinforces positive emotional climates that support both character development and social interaction in school.

Building on these findings, the formation of emotional relationships through the practice of salim unfolds as a layered process characterized by reciprocal interaction, affective exchange, and relational internalization, as illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Emotional Relationship Formation through Salim**

Table 1 presents a thematic classification of salim practices as observed in daily school interactions, organized into four interrelated categories that reflect varying levels of behavioral expression and moral internalization. The table integrates data derived from interviews, field findings, and documentation to illustrate how specific forms of practice correspond to distinct dimensions of adab formation. Routine-based practices indicate structured behavioral habituation, while gesture-oriented practices highlight the embodied nature of respect through physical expression. Spontaneous interactions demonstrate the extension of salim beyond formal settings, suggesting internalized behavioral patterns. Value-driven behaviors, in turn, represent the highest level of moral internalization, where students actively engage in salim based on personal awareness rather than external prompts. This classification underscores that the cultivation of adab through salim is not a singular act, but a progressive process shaped by repetition, interaction, and experiential engagement within the school environment.

## Developing Tawadhu through the Practice of Salim

*Tawadhu* refers to a disposition of humility characterized by modest behavior, self-restraint, and an awareness of one's position in relation to others, particularly toward figures of knowledge and authority. Within the context of this study, *tawadhu* is not transmitted as an abstract moral concept but is cultivated through embodied practice in everyday school interaction. The practice of salim serves as a concrete medium through which this disposition is gradually formed. Actions such as lowering the head, gently greeting teachers, and kissing the teacher's hand function as repeated physical expressions of humility that are internalized over time. These bodily practices shape students' awareness of respect and modesty in relation to teachers. Through continuous repetition, students experience humility not only cognitively but also physically and emotionally. As a result, *tawadhu* emerges as a lived disposition rather than a prescribed value, highlighting how character formation occurs through consistent and meaningful interaction within the school environment.

Interview findings reveal that the practice of salim is closely associated with the development of humility through physical behavior. Teachers consistently emphasized that bodily gestures play an important role in shaping students' attitudes. One teacher explained: "We teach students that lowering their head is a way to train humility." This statement indicates that physical movement is intentionally used as a means of character formation. Another teacher further elaborated: "If students get used to showing respect through their body, their attitude will follow." From the students' perspective, the experience is also meaningful: "I feel calmer and more respectful after performing salim." In addition, some students expressed a sense of spiritual effect: "I feel like I receive blessings after performing salim." These responses suggest that salim is not only a physical act but also an experience that shapes students' inner disposition toward humility.

Field findings indicate that the development of *tawadhu* through salim is reflected in students' physical posture and behavioral consistency during daily interaction. Students were observed lowering their heads, approaching teachers with controlled movements, and maintaining a gentle and respectful manner when performing salim. These gestures were carried out in a consistent and deliberate way, suggesting that students had internalized the expected form of behavior. The interaction was not performed hastily but with visible attentiveness and composure. In addition, students demonstrated similar respectful body language when interacting with teachers outside formal routines, indicating continuity of behavior. Documentation in the form of photographs and video recordings further showed students maintaining soft facial expressions and calm gestures during salim. These patterns suggest that physical expressions of humility were not situational but embedded in students' everyday conduct. The findings indicate that *tawadhu* is developed through repeated bodily practice that gradually shapes students' attitudes and behavioral disposition.

**Table 2. Classification of Embodied Practices**

Dimension of Practice	Forms of Bodily Expression
<b>Postural Discipline</b>	1. Lowering the head during salim
	2. Slight bowing when greeting
<b>Gesture Control</b>	3. Gentle hand movement
	4. Controlled pace when approaching teacher
<b>Emotional Expression</b>	5. Soft facial expression
	6. Calm demeanor during interaction
<b>Behavioral Continuity</b>	7. Consistent respectful gestures outside formal settings
	8. Repetition across daily interaction

Table 2 demonstrates that the formation of tawadhu through salim is structured through the integration of bodily discipline, controlled gestures, and sustained behavioral consistency. The classification reveals that humility is not developed through isolated actions but through patterned physical engagement that is repeatedly enacted in everyday interaction. The presence of postural discipline indicates that students learn to position their bodies in ways that reflect awareness of respect, while gesture control suggests the development of self-regulation as part of character formation. Furthermore, the inclusion of emotional expression highlights that humility is not limited to external behavior but is accompanied by internal composure. The continuity of these behaviors across different contexts suggests that tawadhu has moved beyond situational practice and become embedded within students' behavioral disposition. The table therefore reinforces that the cultivation of humility occurs through sustained bodily practice that integrates physical, emotional, and behavioral dimensions into a coherent form of character development.

## Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the practice of *salim* operates as a lived pedagogical mechanism through which moral, emotional, and embodied dimensions of character are simultaneously cultivated. Rather than functioning as a symbolic or ritualized gesture, *salim* emerges as an experiential process that integrates action, affect, and meaning within everyday school interaction (Musthofa et al., 2023). This positioning challenges dominant approaches to character education that tend to prioritize cognitive understanding over lived experience, suggesting that moral formation is more effectively developed through repeated and meaningful social practice (Rahman & Solarim, 2022).

From the perspective of adab cultivation, the findings indicate that respect toward teachers is not transmitted through formal instruction alone but is internalized through habitual interaction (Fathurohman et al., 2022). The classification presented in Table 1 shows that students gradually move from structured routines to value-driven behaviors, reflecting a shift from externally guided action to internally motivated conduct. This progression suggests that

moral awareness is not immediately acquired but develops through sustained engagement (Sukidin et al., 2022). Unlike conventional models of character education that rely on moral explanation, the practice of *salim* demonstrates how respect can be formed through embodied repetition and social reinforcement (Nugroho & Triana, 2021). This aligns with the view that moral behavior becomes meaningful when it is enacted consistently within relational contexts, rather than merely understood conceptually (Madjar, 2020).

The second dimension of the findings highlights the affective role of *salim* in strengthening emotional relationships between students and teachers. The conceptual model presented in Figure 1 illustrates that emotional bonding emerges through layered interaction, beginning with simple gestures and evolving into mutual recognition and relational trust. This finding suggests that emotional connection in educational settings is not incidental but can be systematically cultivated through everyday practices. Importantly, the reciprocal nature of the interaction indicates that both students and teachers actively contribute to the formation of emotional bonds (Phelps & Brown, 2023). This challenges the assumption that teacher–student relationships are primarily shaped by instructional dynamics, instead emphasizing the role of informal and affective exchanges in creating a supportive learning environment (Syzykova et al., 2023). The findings also suggest that emotional security, as experienced by students, is closely tied to repeated experiences of acknowledgment and care, which are embedded within the practice of *salim* (Salim & Dawwd, 2019).

The third dimension concerns the development of *tawadhu* through embodied practice. The findings show that humility is cultivated through disciplined bodily expression, where gestures such as lowering the head and controlling movement become vehicles for internal transformation. Table 2 demonstrates that physical behavior, emotional composure, and behavioral continuity are interconnected elements in the formation of humility. This indicates that *tawadhu* is not formed through abstract moral instruction but through repeated physical engagement that shapes both awareness and disposition (Isyraqi Jamil, Zulfahmi & Kadir, 2021). The findings further suggest that the body functions as an active medium in moral learning, where consistent physical practice contributes to the stabilization of character (Carfi & Mastrogiovanni, 2023). This perspective offers an alternative to approaches that treat moral development as purely cognitive, highlighting instead the role of embodied experience in shaping ethical behavior (Isyraqi Jamil, Zulfahmi & Kadir, 2021; Mammen & Paulus, 2023; Wijnen-Meijer et al., 2022).

Taken together, these findings suggest that *salim* functions as a holistic model of experiential character education that integrates three interrelated dimensions: behavioral habituation, emotional connection, and embodied humility. The practice illustrates how cultural and religious traditions can serve as effective pedagogical tools when they are embedded in daily interaction rather

than treated as symbolic rituals. Furthermore, the findings indicate that character formation is most effective when it occurs through sustained, meaningful engagement that involves both action and reflection (Phelps & Brown, 2023).

This study therefore contributes to a growing body of research that emphasizes the importance of experiential and relational approaches to education. It extends this perspective by demonstrating that local cultural practices, such as *salim*, can provide contextually grounded models of character formation that are both meaningful and sustainable. In doing so, it offers an alternative framework for understanding how moral values can be cultivated through everyday practice, particularly within educational settings that seek to integrate cognitive, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of learning.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study return us to a central concern in character education, namely how moral values are not only understood but genuinely lived by students in their everyday interactions. The practice of *salim*, often perceived as a simple cultural gesture, reveals a far more complex pedagogical function when examined closely. It operates as a continuous experiential process through which students learn to enact respect, build emotional connections, and embody humility in ways that cannot be achieved through instruction alone. The study shows that character formation emerges not from isolated teaching moments, but from repeated, meaningful engagement embedded in daily school life. Through this process, values such as *adab*, relational sensitivity, and *tawadhu* are gradually internalized, not as abstract ideals, but as lived dispositions shaped by interaction, emotion, and embodied practice.

These insights carry important implications for both theory and practice. They suggest that effective character education requires a shift from programmatic approaches toward practices that are relational, habitual, and culturally grounded. Rather than replacing local traditions with standardized models, educational institutions may benefit from recognizing and refining practices that already carry moral significance within their context. At the same time, this study opens space for further inquiry into how similar embodied practices function across different cultural and educational settings, and how they might be adapted without losing their meaning. What becomes evident is that small, often overlooked interactions can hold substantial pedagogical value when sustained over time. In this sense, *salim* is not merely a tradition to be preserved, but a living practice that offers a grounded and enduring pathway for character formation in contemporary education.

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