



Strengthening Character Education Through Behaviorist Approaches: Strategic Management In Shaping Students' Ethics And Morality

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines the strategic role of madrasah ibtidaiyah in strengthening character education to shape students' ethics and morals from an early age, particularly amid growing concerns over moral degradation among the younger generation. Adopting a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews with teachers, principals, and students, as well as analysis of learning documents and school programs. The research focuses on the application of a behavioristic approach, emphasizing habituation and reinforcement in shaping student behavior. Findings reveal that character values—such as discipline, responsibility, politeness, and honesty—are integrated into both classroom instruction and daily school routines, including greetings, congregational prayers, and community service. Positive reinforcement through rewards and corrective measures via punishment are applied consistently to encourage desired behaviors. Continuous repetition, modeling, and reinforcement are found to be effective in embedding these values, creating a systematic and well-directed framework for moral and ethical development. The study concludes that a behavioristic approach, when implemented strategically within a religious-based elementary education setting, offers a practical and impactful method for fostering students' character, ensuring alignment between moral values and daily conduct.

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INTRODUCTION

Character education is a critical component in shaping the moral, ethical, and social fabric of future generations. In the Indonesian context, where cultural and religious values are deeply embedded in daily life, the development of students' character from an early age plays a central role in maintaining societal

harmony. The erosion of moral values among young people has been increasingly reported, manifesting in a decline in responsibility, courtesy, and discipline (Wibowo & Sari, 2023). These issues are not only educational concerns but also social challenges that can undermine community cohesion and national development. Educational institutions, especially at the elementary level, are therefore expected to serve as the first formal setting where students internalize moral principles and positive behavior. By instilling strong ethics and values early, schools contribute to building responsible citizens who respect societal norms. Consequently, research on effective strategies for strengthening character education is essential, as it addresses a pressing need for both educational quality and social stability in Indonesia.

Despite the recognized importance of character education, its implementation in many Indonesian elementary schools remains inconsistent. While the national curriculum includes moral and civic education, the practical application often falls short of expectations. Observations suggest that students frequently display behaviors such as disregard for rules, lack of punctuality, minimal respect for teachers, and insufficient cooperation with peers (Wibowo & Sari, 2023). These behaviors indicate a gap between theoretical moral instruction and actual behavioral outcomes. Contributing factors include limited teacher training in character-based pedagogy, insufficient school policies to reinforce positive behavior, and a lack of systematic integration between academic subjects and moral values. This disconnect suggests that existing approaches to character education may not be sufficiently effective in addressing behavioral challenges. As such, there is a growing demand for pedagogical methods that can translate abstract moral values into tangible, observable behaviors in students, ensuring that ethics and discipline become habitual rather than merely conceptual.

In practice, the challenges of implementing character education are particularly evident in the context of religious-based elementary schools, such as Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI). These institutions, which operate under Islamic educational principles, have a strategic mandate to integrate religious teachings with academic learning (Suharni & Firmansyah, 2024). While many MIs promote routines like greeting teachers, performing congregational prayers, and participating in community service, the consistency and effectiveness of these practices vary significantly. At MI Thoriqotul Hasan Probolinggo, for example, various character-building activities have been introduced, including structured morning greetings, collective prayers, and award systems for exemplary conduct. However, informal observations reveal that not all students consistently apply these values outside formal routines, suggesting that behavioral change may be situational rather than deeply internalized. This

raises questions about the methods used to reinforce moral behavior and whether current strategies are sufficient to ensure the continuous application of ethical principles in both school and community contexts.

Previous studies have explored various approaches to character education, ranging from value clarification methods to experiential learning models. Research by Rahmawati & Zulfikar (2022) highlights the relevance of behavioristic strategies, which emphasize the development of observable behaviors through systematic reinforcement. This approach relies on stimulus-response mechanisms and uses positive reinforcement (rewards) or negative reinforcement (corrective measures) to shape behavior. Studies have shown that such methods can effectively encourage compliance with rules, punctuality, and respectful conduct among students. However, other scholars have emphasized the need for more holistic approaches that combine behavioral training with reflective moral reasoning, arguing that reinforcement alone may not lead to long-term internalization of values. While behavioristic methods are widely used in Indonesian classrooms, their application is often fragmented, lacking integration into a broader educational framework. This gap presents an opportunity to investigate how structured, consistent behavioristic strategies can be applied within a religious-based elementary school setting to enhance both behavioral compliance and ethical understanding.

Although a number of studies have documented the benefits of behavioristic approaches in promoting discipline and responsibility, many have been limited to secular school settings or short-term interventions. For instance, existing research often measures immediate behavioral changes without examining sustained impacts on students' ethical and moral reasoning (Rahmawati & Zulfikar, 2022). Moreover, the majority of studies do not account for the unique cultural and religious contexts of Islamic schools, where moral education is deeply intertwined with faith-based practices. This represents a significant research gap, as religiously grounded institutions like Madrasah Ibtidaiyah offer distinct opportunities for reinforcing values through spiritual routines and community-oriented activities. Addressing this gap requires an in-depth exploration of how behavioristic strategies can be adapted and sustained within these contexts, ensuring that students not only display positive behavior in structured settings but also internalize these values as part of their everyday lives, both inside and outside the school environment.

The novelty of this study lies in its examination of a comprehensive, behavioristic-based character education program embedded within the daily life of a religious-based elementary school. Unlike prior research that isolates character education as an add-on activity, this study investigates its integration across both academic and non-academic routines. By focusing on MI Thoriqotul

Hasan Probolinggo, the research provides empirical insights into how structured reinforcement systems—consisting of consistent rewards, corrective feedback, and habitual practice—can be systematically implemented in a faith-based learning environment. Furthermore, it evaluates the sustainability of these practices and their impact on both behavioral compliance and moral internalization. The state-of-the-art contribution of this study is its contextualized application of behavioristic principles in a religious education setting, addressing both the practical and philosophical dimensions of moral development. This dual focus ensures that character formation is not only visible in outward behavior but also rooted in the students' ethical and spiritual consciousness (Suharni & Firmansyah, 2024).

Given the persistent challenges in character education and the partial effectiveness of current approaches, this study poses a critical research question: How can behavioristic strategies be effectively implemented within a religious-based elementary school to strengthen students' ethics and morals? The working argument is that a systematic, consistent application of behavioristic principles—reinforced through daily routines, structured feedback, and integration into religious activities—can foster lasting behavioral change and moral internalization. By focusing on MI Thoriqotul Hasan Probolinggo, this research will contribute to the broader understanding of character education in contexts where religious and cultural values are central to schooling. The findings are expected to offer practical guidelines for educators seeking to address moral and disciplinary issues in similar settings, while also advancing the theoretical discourse on the compatibility of behavioristic approaches with values-based education systems.

In conclusion, character education remains a pressing priority for Indonesia's educational agenda, particularly in addressing the growing concerns over moral decline among young students. While behavioristic approaches offer a practical means to shape observable behaviors, their long-term impact and integration within religious educational settings require further investigation. This study aims to fill that gap by examining the systematic implementation of reinforcement-based strategies at MI Thoriqotul Hasan Probolinggo. By analyzing both the processes and outcomes of this approach, the research seeks to determine its effectiveness in not only promoting compliance with ethical norms but also fostering genuine moral commitment. The significance of this work extends beyond the case study, as its findings could inform policy development, teacher training programs, and the design of character education curricula in similar religious-based schools. Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of merging pedagogical precision with moral and spiritual depth in the formation of students' character.

METHOD

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of strategies for strengthening character education in shaping students' ethics and morals through a behavioristic lens. This approach was chosen for its capacity to explore events, behaviors, and social interactions in their natural, contextual settings without manipulating variables. Qualitative inquiry enabled the researcher to immerse in the participants' social environment, uncovering the meanings that emerge within the process of character formation (Wibowo & Sari, 2023). The research was conducted at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI) Thoriqotul Hasan, located in Dringu District, Probolinggo Regency, East Java. This school was purposefully selected due to its systematic and consistent implementation of character-building programs across both academic and extracurricular activities. Fieldwork took place between May and July 2025, with data collection carried out directly within the school environment.

Participants included the principal, homeroom teachers, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers, upper-grade students (grades IV–VI), and several parents as supporting informants. Purposive sampling was applied to identify individuals with in-depth knowledge of the school's character education practices and direct involvement in their implementation (Rahmawati & Zulfikar, 2022). Multiple data collection techniques were employed: participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Observation focused on daily practices such as congregational prayers, reward-giving, and student discipline in adhering to school rules. Interviews were conducted to gather insights on the strategies applied and the integration of behavioristic principles into daily routines. Documentation involved the review of lesson plans, daily activity agendas, and program reports related to student character development. The combination of these methods ensured comprehensive, complementary, and credible data (Suharni & Firmansyah, 2024).

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), comprising three iterative stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting and summarizing relevant information from observations and interviews. Data were then presented in descriptive narratives, supported by direct quotations from informants to strengthen interpretation. Finally, conclusions were drawn progressively by identifying patterns and relationships within the data. To ensure data validity, both source and methodological triangulation were applied. Data from observations, interviews, and documentation were

compared across different informants, and member checking was conducted by presenting findings to participants for verification of accuracy and credibility.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Behavioristic Approach in Character Education

The operational definition of the behavioristic approach in this study refers to a structured and consistent method of shaping students' ethics and morals through the principle of stimulus–response, reinforced by external motivators. In the context of MI Thoriqotul Hasan, this means teachers intentionally design learning activities and school routines that reward desirable behavior and provide corrective measures for undesirable behavior. Positive reinforcement includes verbal praise, symbolic rewards, and granting leadership roles, while educational negative reinforcement takes the form of mild reprimands, constructive feedback, or guided reflection sessions.

The first interview was conducted with a guru Pendidikan Agama Islam, who explained that rewards were not merely material but often symbolic, such as giving students the opportunity to lead prayers or become class monitors. According to the teacher, these recognitions encouraged students to maintain and repeat the desired behavior. From the researcher's perspective, this aligns with Skinner's (2023) assertion that symbolic rewards can be equally effective as tangible ones in reinforcing behavioral change, particularly in moral and ethical contexts. A second interview with a homeroom teacher revealed that consistency in giving reinforcement was the most critical factor. The teacher emphasized that if rewards or punishments were delayed or inconsistently applied, students tended to lose motivation and revert to old habits. This statement supports Putri & Kurniawan's (2023) findings that timeliness in stimulus delivery strengthens the association between behavior and consequence. The researcher interprets this as evidence that in a school setting, reinforcement must be immediate to create strong behavioral patterns.

Observation in the field further confirmed these interview findings. During daily routines such as morning assemblies, congregational prayers, and classroom learning, teachers were observed giving direct verbal praise when students displayed respectful conduct, such as greeting teachers or assisting peers. Similarly, when students broke minor rules, teachers provided on-the-spot corrective feedback rather than delaying the response. The researcher interprets these patterns as an intentional alignment of practice with the theoretical foundation of behaviorism, ensuring that every stimulus is paired closely in time with the corresponding behavior.

From these data, the researcher restates that the application of the

behavioristic approach at MI Thoriqotul Hasan centers on habitual reinforcement—both positive and corrective—integrated into the daily rhythm of school life. This approach is not limited to formal classroom instruction but extends to informal interactions and extracurricular activities, thereby saturating the students’ environment with consistent behavioral cues. The overall pattern emerging from this sub-finding is that the behavioristic approach works most effectively when three elements converge: reinforcement that is symbolic yet meaningful, consistency in application, and alignment with the school’s religious-cultural context. The integration of Islamic values into the reward system not only strengthens compliance but also facilitates the internalization of moral principles, transforming external behavior into intrinsic personal values over time.

Positive Reinforcement (Reward) in Character Education

In this study, the operational definition of the sub-finding positive reinforcement refers to the systematic provision of pleasant stimuli immediately following the demonstration of desirable behavior, with the aim of increasing the likelihood of its recurrence. At MI Thoriqotul Hasan, this reinforcement is manifested through three main strategies: verbal praise, the Achievement Star system, and small symbolic rewards. These strategies are integrated into both classroom instruction and extracurricular routines to strengthen students’ discipline, politeness, responsibility, and cooperation.

Interview Excerpt	Indicator	Informant
“When a student lines up neatly without being told, I will immediately say, ‘Excellent, you’ve queued very well today.’ I can see their smile and they usually repeat the same behavior the next day.”	Immediate verbal praise for desirable conduct	Islamic Education Teacher
“We use a star board in class. Students who collect ten stars can exchange them for a small gift or be named ‘Student of the Week’. This keeps them consistent in showing good behavior.”	Symbolic reward through Achievement Stars	Homeroom Teacher
“Sometimes I give a pencil or let them be the class leader for a day. It’s not about the item; it’s about recognition and trust.”	Small tangible rewards as symbolic acknowledgment	Extracurricular Coordinator

From the data above, the first excerpt reflects the immediacy and emotional impact of verbal praise. The Islamic Education Teacher’s observation illustrates the core behaviorist principle: reinforcement is most effective when given promptly, directly after the target behavior. The researcher interprets this as evidence that emotional satisfaction—manifested through smiles and

positive body language—serves as a reinforcing stimulus that strengthens the association between behavior and reward.

The second excerpt highlights the Achievement Star system, which provides a medium-term reinforcement structure. The researcher views this as a bridge between instant gratification and sustained behavioral patterns. By allowing students to accumulate stars over time, the system cultivates consistency and patience, teaching that good conduct has both immediate and cumulative benefits. This aligns with Ramadhan & Sari's (2023) findings that token-based systems effectively encourage habit formation in primary-aged children.

Observation in the field reinforced these interpretations. During class and school-wide activities, teachers were observed to give spontaneous verbal praise when students displayed positive behaviors, such as helping a peer or being punctual. The Achievement Star board was prominently displayed in classrooms, visibly motivating students to monitor their own behavior. Small rewards, though materially modest, were met with visible enthusiasm, with students often showing the item to peers as a mark of achievement. The researcher interprets this as a sign that in the cultural context of the school, symbolic recognition carries significant social value, amplifying the reinforcement effect.

Restating the findings, positive reinforcement at MI Thoriqotul Hasan is strategically multi-layered: immediate praise satisfies short-term emotional needs, the star system reinforces medium-term consistency, and small symbolic rewards serve as a form of recognition that strengthens students' self-esteem and sense of belonging. The pattern emerging from the data shows a deliberate blend of immediacy, continuity, and symbolism. The reinforcement strategies are not isolated events but are embedded within the school's social and moral framework, ensuring that behavior change is sustained and gradually internalized. This layered approach transforms reinforcement from a mere behavioral control tool into a holistic character-building mechanism.

Routine Practice of Good Behavior at MI Thoriqotul Hasan

The routine practice of good behavior at MI Thoriqotul Hasan is operationally defined as a series of repeated actions aimed at cultivating positive habits among students, including greeting (*salam*), smiling, showing politeness, and engaging in communal work (*gotong royong*). In practice, this routine is not merely ceremonial but is integrated into all school activities—from interactions at the school gate, in the classroom, to collaborative activities within the school environment. These four behaviors are regarded as the pillars of student character building, fostering a school climate that is friendly, religious, and rooted in a sense of togetherness.

In an interview, the Principal stated, “Every morning, teachers stand at the gate to welcome students. We encourage the children to greet us with a smile. If they forget, the teacher will gently remind them.” The researcher interpreted this statement as a form of consistent verbal and non-verbal reinforcement. The presence of teachers at the school gate serves not only as a form of supervision but also as a direct role model, strengthening the values of greeting and smiling through daily warm interactions.

An interview with a classroom teacher reinforced this point, saying, “We do *gotong royong* every Friday. The children clean their classrooms and the yard. They already know the schedule and usually don’t need to be reminded.” The researcher interpreted this as an indicator of the internalization of values such as togetherness and responsibility. What initially may have been driven by teacher instruction has gradually transformed into a deeply ingrained collective awareness, so that students perform it voluntarily. The researcher’s observation showed that every morning students arrive and immediately greet the teachers at the gate while smiling. In the classroom, they use polite language when speaking to teachers and peers. On Fridays, all students participate in cleaning the school in an organized manner. The researcher interpreted these practices as the result of consistent repetition, strong role modeling by teachers, and a clear scheduling system for activities.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the practice of greeting, smiling, politeness, and *gotong royong* at MI Thoriqotul Hasan has successfully become part of the school’s culture. These values are not only taught in theory but are embedded in students’ daily routines, strengthening social relationships, fostering respect, and enhancing solidarity within the school community. The pattern that emerges from these findings shows that the success of routine good behavior in school is influenced by a combination of teacher role modeling, consistent implementation, and structured activity planning. The four behaviors complement each other: greeting and smiling establish positive initial interactions, politeness maintains the quality of relationships, and *gotong royong* reinforces cooperation and social care. Together, they create a warm, orderly, and conducive learning environment for student character formation.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the behavioristic approach, when strategically embedded in the daily routines of a religious-based elementary school, has a significant impact on shaping students’ ethics and morals. The consistent use of positive reinforcement—through verbal praise, symbolic recognition such as the Achievement Star system, and small tangible rewards—proved to be effective in encouraging desirable behaviors such as

discipline, politeness, responsibility, and cooperation. These strategies, grounded in the principle of stimulus–response, transform moral expectations from abstract ideals into concrete, observable actions.

One of the key strengths of the implementation at MI Thoriqotul Hasan is the multi-layered reinforcement model. Immediate verbal praise provides instant emotional gratification, reinforcing short-term compliance. The Achievement Star system serves as a medium-term motivator, cultivating persistence and habit formation. Small symbolic rewards, though modest in material value, carry significant social meaning in the school’s cultural context, boosting students’ self-esteem and sense of belonging. This layered structure ensures that reinforcement addresses both immediate and sustained behavioral outcomes, aligning with Skinner’s theory that reinforcement is most effective when both timely and contextually meaningful. Equally important is the integration of routine moral practices—greeting (salam), smiling, politeness, and communal work (gotong royong)—into the school’s culture. These routines are not isolated moral lessons but are woven into the fabric of daily school life, supported by teacher role modeling and structured activity schedules. Over time, such repeated actions have moved from being externally prompted behaviors to internally motivated habits. This transition from compliance to genuine internalization highlights the synergy between repetition, reinforcement, and role modeling in character education.

Furthermore, the religious-cultural environment of the madrasah plays a pivotal role in amplifying the effects of reinforcement. Linking moral behaviors to Islamic values deepens their significance, making them more likely to be retained and practiced beyond the school setting. This alignment between pedagogy and spiritual values bridges the gap often observed between school-taught morality and real-world behavior, a challenge noted in prior research on character education in secular contexts. The patterns observed in this study suggest that behavioristic strategies are most successful when three conditions are met: consistency in application, symbolic-cultural relevance of rewards, and integration into the broader moral and religious framework of the school. These conditions ensure that the approach functions not merely as behavior control but as a sustainable mechanism for moral internalization. In this sense, MI Thoriqotul Hasan’s practice offers a model for other religious-based schools seeking to blend pedagogical precision with value-based education. In conclusion, while the behavioristic approach is sometimes criticized for focusing too heavily on external motivation, this study shows that, when culturally contextualized and combined with moral role modeling, it can foster deep and lasting ethical development. The case of MI Thoriqotul Hasan demonstrates that a well-structured reinforcement system, embedded within a

supportive religious environment, can bridge the gap between knowing what is right and consistently doing what is right.

CONCLUSION

The reinforcement of character education through a behavioristic approach at MI Thoriqotul Hasan Probolinggo has proven to be an effective strategy for cultivating students' ethics and morals. By focusing on the formation of behavior through consistent habituation, grounded in the principles of stimulus–response and repeated reinforcement, the school has successfully embedded positive actions—such as greeting, smiling, showing politeness to teachers and peers, and engaging in cooperative activities to maintain a clean school environment—into students' daily lives. Over time, these behaviors have evolved beyond mere compliance with rules or teacher supervision, gradually becoming ingrained habits and integral aspects of students' character. This transformation reflects a natural process of moral internalization, achieved through structured repetition and meaningful positive reinforcement.

The success of this approach is strongly tied to the active role of teachers as behavioral role models, consistently demonstrating concrete examples of the values they seek to instill. Moreover, the supportive and cohesive school environment, where all members of the school community share responsibility for practicing and upholding character values, has amplified the impact of the behavioristic strategy. Together, these factors have created a holistic system that not only shapes outward conduct but also nurtures an enduring moral compass in students, preparing them to grow into ethical and principled individuals.

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