

## Operationalizing ‘*aqi*’ as Moral Reasoning in Islamic Education: A Multi-Site Qualitative Study in Indonesia

Irgi Aqilul Fathoni <sup>1\*</sup> , Yuan Remanita <sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1,2</sup> Universitas Islam Negeri Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung, Indonesia

\*Corresponding Author’s e-mail: [fathoniirgi@gmail.com](mailto:fathoniirgi@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

*Moral reasoning is central to contemporary education, yet empirical studies rarely examine how the Islamic concept of ‘*aqi* (reason) is operationalized within school practices. This comparative multi-site qualitative study investigates how moral reasoning is cultivated through Islamic education at two secondary schools in Tulungagung, Indonesia: SMK NU Tulungagung (vocational) and MA Al-Ma’arif Tulungagung (senior secondary). Data collection comprised non-participant classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with school leaders, teachers, and students, and analysis of curricular and institutional documents. Thematic analysis revealed an integrated pedagogical ecology in which dialogic classroom instruction, contextualized exemplars, reflective and problem-based tasks, structured extracurricular enactments of religious values, sustained teacher mediation, and formal competency articulation function as interlocking mechanisms for fostering moral reasoning. Both sites manifested these core mechanisms, though the pedagogical emphasis differed: the vocational site foregrounded applied problem-solving tied to everyday and occupational responsibilities, whereas the general secondary site emphasized doctrinal explication prior to application. By empirically operationalizing ‘*aqi* as moral reasoning and demonstrating cross-contextual mechanisms, the study offers a transferable framework for faith-based curricula and teacher development that integrates ethical deliberation with cognitive and practical formation. Implications for policy and longitudinal research are discussed further internationally.*

**Keywords:** *islamic education, moral reasoning, ‘*aqi*, qualitative multi-site study, vocational education, secondary education, character education.*

DOI: [10.70376/jerp.v4i1.398](https://doi.org/10.70376/jerp.v4i1.398)

Received: 2025-09-11; Revised: 2026-01-28; Accepted: 2026-02-03; Published: 2026-02-10.

## INTRODUCTION

Recent scholarship in education increasingly recognizes moral reasoning as a core developmental capacity that enables learners to evaluate ethical situations, justify moral judgments, and translate principled understanding into concrete action.<sup>1</sup> Moral reasoning is not an innate attribute but a cognitive moral process that develops through sustained engagement in dialogic learning, reflective deliberation, and opportunities to apply ethical principles in lived contexts.<sup>2</sup> Empirical research demonstrates that educational environments that intentionally integrate discussion, justification, and perspective-taking foster more advanced moral cognition than instruction focused solely on knowledge transmission.<sup>3</sup>

Parallel developments in vocational and secondary education research highlight the need to embed reflective and critical-thinking practices within curricula that have traditionally prioritized technical or academic achievement.<sup>4</sup> Studies in vocational education and training show that integrating reflective reasoning into skills-oriented learning supports ethical awareness and decision-making relevant to professional and social life.<sup>5</sup> These findings underscore the importance of educational designs that connect cognitive engagement with enacted practice, particularly in contexts where students are prepared simultaneously for social participation and occupational roles.<sup>6</sup>

Faith-based educational institutions represent a distinctive context for moral development, as they combine doctrinal instruction, ritual practice, and institutional norms that shape students' value orientations.<sup>7</sup> International research suggests that religious education can promote prosocial behavior and ethical commitment when pedagogical practices actively engage students' reasoning processes rather than emphasizing compliance or rote habituation alone.<sup>8</sup> However, much of the existing literature on religious schooling

---

<sup>1</sup> Annett Wienmeister, "Moral Reasoning Skills: What They Are and How They Can Be Furthered in Health Professions Education," *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 28, no. 4 (December 21, 2025): 763–74, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11019-025-10289-0>; Melanie Killen and Audun Dahl, "Moral Reasoning Enables Developmental and Societal Change," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 16, no. 6 (November 23, 2021): 1209–25, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691620964076>; Nikol Žiha, "Value Education in Law School Curriculum: Cultivating Moral Autonomy," *Pravni Vjesnik* 40, no. 1 (2024): 7–30, <https://doi.org/10.25234/pv/28586>.

<sup>2</sup> Naila Latif et al., "Investigating the Correlation Between Moral Reasoning and Cognitive Development in High School Student," *ACADEMIA International Journal for Social Sciences* 4, no. 3 (August 5, 2025): 2369–85, <https://doi.org/10.63056/ACAD.004.03.0536>.

<sup>3</sup> Killen and Dahl, "Moral Reasoning Enables Developmental and Societal Change."

<sup>4</sup> Zhanar Sabyrovna Bekbayeva et al., "Fostering Post-Secondary Vocational Students' Critical Thinking through Multi-Level Tasks in Learning Environments," *World Journal on Educational Technology: Current Issues* 13, no. 3 (July 31, 2021): 397–406, <https://doi.org/10.18844/wjet.v13i3.5948>; Jianbo He and Xianteng Luo, "On Cultivating Innovative Skilled Talents in Secondary Vocational Education Based on Dual Integration of Education with Industry and Science," *International Journal of Education and Humanities* 18, no. 3 (March 14, 2025): 103–8, <https://doi.org/10.54097/bawqnk62>.

<sup>5</sup> Francesco Tommasi et al., "Enhancing Critical Thinking Skills and Media Literacy in Initial VET Students: A Mixed Methods Study on a Cross-Country Training Program," *International Journal for Research in Vocational Education and Training* 10, no. 2 (July 5, 2023): 239–57, <https://doi.org/10.13152/IJRVET.10.2.5>.

<sup>6</sup> Mahmudulhassan Mahmudulhassan et al., "The Integration of Islamic Epistemology in Ethical and Multicultural Education: Pedagogical Strategies and Challenges," *Multicultural Islamic Education Review* 2, no. 2 (February 22, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.23917/mier.v2i2.7612>.

<sup>7</sup> Hicham Diouane et al., "The Dynamics of Islamic Thought in Responding to Contemporary Challenges," *Bulletin of Islamic Research* 3, no. 4 (June 5, 2025): 671–86, <https://doi.org/10.69526/bir.v3i4.361>.

<sup>8</sup> Mohd Zailani Mohd Yusoff et al., "The Effect of Moral Reasoning and Values as the Mediator towards Student's Prosocial Behaviour," *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 27, no. 1 (December 31, 2022): 32–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2021.2021959>.

remains descriptive or normative, offering limited empirical insight into how specific pedagogical mechanisms cultivate moral reasoning in daily educational practice.

This limitation is particularly evident in contemporary research on Islamic education. While classical Islamic thought accords *‘aql* (reason) a central epistemological and ethical role, empirical studies rarely examine how *‘aql* is operationalized pedagogically as moral reasoning across different types of Islamic schools. Moreover, recent advances in moral education research emphasize that effective ethical learning arises from integrating cognitive deliberation and affective engagement, such as compassion-oriented case discussions, rather than from cognitive instruction alone.<sup>9</sup> Bridging these perspectives requires empirical attention to how Islamic pedagogical practices function in diverse institutional settings.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines how moral reasoning, conceptualized through the Islamic notion of *‘aql*, is cultivated through educational practices in two Islamic secondary schools in Tulungagung, Indonesia: SMK NU Tulungagung, an Islamic vocational school, and MA Al-Ma’arif Tulungagung, an Islamic senior secondary school. By investigating two distinct institutional contexts, vocational and general Islamic education, this study provides a comparative qualitative perspective on how moral reasoning is fostered across differing curricular orientations while remaining grounded in shared religious frameworks. Data were generated through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis across both schools, enabling cross-contextual examination of pedagogical routines, ritual practices, competency expectations, and teacher mediation strategies.

The study addresses two research questions: (1) How does moral reasoning operate within Islamic educational practices at SMK NU Tulungagung and MA Al-Ma’arif Tulungagung to support the internalization of human values among students? (2) What pedagogical strategies and institutional arrangements enable *‘aql* to function as a bridge between doctrinal knowledge and ethical decision-making across vocational and general Islamic secondary education contexts?

This study makes three key contributions. First, it advances moral education theory by offering an empirically grounded model that demonstrates how dialogic classroom instruction, ritual enactment, competency articulation, and teacher mediation jointly cultivate moral reasoning across different Islamic school types. Second, it extends vocational education research by illustrating how reflective moral reasoning can be embedded within skills-oriented curricula without displacing technical learning objectives.<sup>10</sup> Third, it contributes to international scholarship on faith-based education by empirically specifying how a classical

---

<sup>9</sup> Nihat Kotluk and Roland Tormey, "Compassion and Engineering Students' Moral Reasoning: The Emotional Experience of Engineering Ethics Cases," *Journal of Engineering Education* 112, no. 3 (July 20, 2023): 719–40, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jee.20538>.

<sup>10</sup> Tommasi et al., "Enhancing Critical Thinking Skills and Media Literacy in Initial VET Students: A Mixed Methods Study on a Cross-Country Training Program."

Islamic concept (*'aqil*) can be operationalized within contemporary pedagogy to promote reasoned moral judgment rather than mere normative compliance.<sup>11,12</sup>

## METHOD

This study used a comparative multi-site qualitative case study design to examine how moral reasoning (*'aqil*) is cultivated through Islamic education in two secondary schools in Tulungagung: SMK NU Tulungagung (vocational) and MA Al-Ma'arif Tulungagung (general senior secondary). A multi-site case approach enabled systematic cross-contextual comparison while preserving contextual depth, an approach recommended when researchers seek to identify both site-specific practices and recurrent, transferable mechanisms.<sup>13</sup> Fieldwork was carried out between September and November 2023. Participants across both sites included school principals, Islamic education teachers, class teachers, and students (Grades 10–12). In total, 15 participants contributed interview data to the present study.

Sampling and recruitment followed a purposive and criterion-based approach to ensure information-rich cases: participants were selected for their direct involvement in Islamic pedagogical practices (teachers and school leaders) or for sustained participation in religious learning activities (students). Purposive sampling was complemented by snowball referral to identify additional informants who could elaborate on institutional practices. The study monitored data saturation during analysis: saturation was considered achieved when two consecutive interviews produced no new substantive codes or categories and when observational and documentary sources repeatedly corroborated emergent themes.<sup>14</sup>

Data collection triangulated three primary sources to capture both practices and institutional artefacts: (1) semi-structured, in-depth interviews (average duration 40–60 minutes) guided by an interview protocol aligned with the research questions, (2) non-participant classroom observations using a structured observation checklist to document instructional sequences and interactional patterns, and (3) document analysis of lesson plans, activity schedules, assessment records, and school artifacts that formalize competency expectations. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. Observations were recorded as field notes and, where permitted, short audio segments. Document collection prioritized recent (2022–2023) materials to ensure alignment with current practice. These multiple sources enabled methodological triangulation, supporting credibility and contextual richness.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Mohd Yusoff et al., "The Effect of Moral Reasoning and Values as the Mediator towards Student's Prosocial Behaviour."

<sup>12</sup> Nihat Kotluk and Roland Tormey, "The Impact of Varying Levels of Compassion in Ethics Education Case Studies on Students' Moral Reasoning," *Journal of Moral Education*, October 17, 2024, 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2024.2411962>.

<sup>13</sup> R K Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (SAGE Publications, 2017), <https://books.google.co.id/books?id=uX1ZDwAAQBAJ>; M B Miles, A M Huberman, and J Saldana, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* (SAGE Publications, 2013), <https://books.google.co.id/books?id=p0wXBAAQBAJ>.

<sup>14</sup> Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "One Size Fits All? What Counts as Quality Practice in (Reflexive) Thematic Analysis?," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 18, no. 3 (July 3, 2021): 328–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>.

<sup>15</sup> Yvonna S. Lincoln, Egon G. Guba, and Joseph J. Pilotta, "Naturalistic Inquiry," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 9, no. 4 (January 1985): 438–39, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767\(85\)90062-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(85)90062-8); Dan Jacobson, "Naturalistic Inquiry," in *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, vol. 75 (London: Elsevier, 2020), 267–72, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-102295-5.10579-7>.

Ethical procedures conformed to international qualitative norms. Prior to fieldwork, the research team obtained institutional approval and secured written informed consent from all adult participants; for student participants under 18, parental consent and student assent were obtained. Participant anonymity was protected through pseudonyms and identification codes; all stored data were password-protected and archived on secure drives. Reflexive field memos documented researcher decisions, access arrangements, and potential positionality effects throughout data collection to enhance transparency.<sup>16</sup>

Data management and analysis followed an iterative, transparent pipeline. Transcripts, field notes, and documents were imported into a qualitative data management system and subjected to an initial open-coding phase to identify meaning units. Coding proceeded through axial coding to establish relationships among categories and selective coding to develop higher-order themes, following the interactive analytic model articulated by Miles et al. (2014). To enhance analytical clarity and reproducibility, the research team maintained a detailed codebook that included code definitions, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and exemplar extracts. Reflexive thematic analysis procedures were used to refine themes and ensure interpretive coherence.<sup>17</sup>

Rigor was further strengthened through multiple strategies to enhance trustworthiness. Investigator triangulation involved two researchers independently coding a subset of transcripts (20–30% of the data) and calculating intercoder reliability during the early stages; discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached, and the codebook was revised accordingly. Member checking was conducted by sharing draft theme summaries with a purposive sample of participants to validate and clarify the summaries. Dependability and confirmability were supported by an audit trail composed of raw data, coding memos, analytic matrices, and decision logs. Thick description of contextual detail and exemplar quotations are provided in the Results to support transferability judgments.<sup>18</sup>

Reporting adhered to established qualitative reporting standards: the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research proposed by Tong et al.<sup>19</sup> guided reporting on team reflexivity, study design, and data collection, while the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research according to O'Brien et al.<sup>20</sup> informed, analytic transparency, and trustworthiness statements. To maximize reproducibility, the manuscript includes three appendices: [Appendix A](#) containing participant table and recruitment summary, [Appendix B](#) explaining interview guide and observation checklist, and [Appendix C](#) containing codebook and analytic matrix. A data-availability statement is included: de-identified transcripts and the

<sup>16</sup> Sarah J. Tracy, "Qualitative Quality: Eight 'Big-Tent' Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Inquiry* 16, no. 10 (December 1, 2010): 837–51, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>.

<sup>17</sup> Braun and Clarke, "One Size Fits All? What Counts as Quality Practice in (Reflexive) Thematic Analysis?"

<sup>18</sup> Tracy, "Qualitative Quality: Eight 'Big-Tent' Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research."

<sup>19</sup> A. Tong, P. Sainsbury, and J. Craig, "Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ): A 32-Item Checklist for Interviews and Focus Groups," *International Journal for Quality in Health Care* 19, no. 6 (September 16, 2007): 349–57, <https://doi.org/10.1093/intqhc/mzm042>.

<sup>20</sup> Bridget C. O'Brien et al., "Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research," *Academic Medicine* 89, no. 9 (September 2014): 1245–51, <https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0000000000000388>.

codebook are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical constraints.

Ethical principles governing qualitative research were carefully observed throughout the study. Prior to data collection, formal permission to conduct the research was obtained from the administrations of SMK NU Tulungagung and MA Al-Ma'arif Tulungagung. All participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained from all adult participants. For student participants under 18, parental or guardian consent was obtained in addition to student assent. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all personal identifiers were removed from transcripts and reports, and pseudonyms were used in place of participants' real names. Data were stored securely and accessed only by the research team. These procedures align with internationally accepted ethical standards for qualitative educational research, emphasizing respect, beneficence, and participant autonomy.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

This section presents the empirical findings of the study conducted at SMK NU Tulungagung and MA Al-Ma'arif Tulungagung. The results are derived from classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. To facilitate clarity and coherence, the findings are organized into major domains that correspond directly to Table 2. This table presents a comprehensive summary of the study's empirical findings conducted at SMK NU Tulungagung and MA Al-Ma'arif Tulungagung. Table 2 integrates data from classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis, and reports observed practices related to instructional processes, student engagement, moral reasoning indicators, institutional structures, and teacher roles. The table is descriptive and does not include interpretation or theoretical explanation.

**Table 2.** Summary of Research Findings

Major Domain	Sub-Domain	Key Findings	Data Source(s)
Instructional Practices	Classroom instruction	Teachers routinely used lecture-based explanations to introduce religious and moral concepts in Islamic education classes.	Classroom observations; lesson plans
	Guided discussion	Lecture sessions were typically followed by guided discussions, during which the teacher posed questions and students responded.	Classroom observations
	Contextual examples	Teachers frequently linked lesson content to students' daily life, school behavior, or community situations.	Classroom observations; teacher interviews
	Reflective tasks	Students were assigned problem-based or reflective tasks, both oral and written, related to moral or religious issues.	Classroom observations; lesson plans
	Questioning strategies	Teachers asked open-ended and reasoning-based questions during classroom discussions.	Classroom observations

Major Domain	Sub-Domain	Key Findings	Data Source(s)
Teacher–Student Interaction	Student explanation	Students were invited to explain, justify, or elaborate on their responses.	Classroom observations
	Feedback and clarification	Teachers provided feedback, clarification, or correction during instructional interaction.	Classroom observations
	Multiple viewpoints	Teachers allowed and acknowledged different student opinions during the discussion.	Classroom observations
Student Engagement	Classroom participation	Students actively participated in discussions by responding to questions or volunteering comments.	Classroom observations
	Peer interaction	Peer-to-peer interaction occurred during group discussions or collaborative activities.	Classroom observations
	Reflective responses	Students demonstrated reflective or ethical consideration in their responses to questions.	Classroom observations
	Student questioning	Students raised questions related to lesson content or moral issues.	Classroom observations
Moral Reasoning Indicators	Ethical references	Students referred to ethical principles or Islamic religious values in their responses.	Classroom observations; student interviews
	Justification of actions	Students explained why actions are considered right or wrong.	Classroom observations; student interviews
	Consequence awareness Real-life connections	Students discussed possible consequences of moral or immoral actions. Religious teachings were connected to real-life situations, daily routines, or future responsibilities.	Classroom observations Classroom observations; interviews
Extracurricular and Religious Activities	Ritual practice	Students participated in structured religious practices (e.g., prayer, wudu, tahlil, memorization).	School documents; observations
	Religious leadership	Senior students served in leadership roles during religious activities.	School records; interviews
	Religious competitions	Students participated in internal or external religious competitions.	School documents; interviews
Institutional Structure	Competency targets	Schools defined cognitive and affective competency targets by grade and semester.	Curriculum documents; lesson plans
	Program scheduling	Religious and moral activities were scheduled and formally documented.	School records
Teacher Roles	Instructional guidance	Teachers guided students during classroom instruction and religious activities.	Interviews; observations
	Coaching and mentoring	Teachers coached students for religious leadership and competitions.	Interviews; observations
	Monitoring and supervision	Teachers monitored student participation and progress in moral and religious activities.	Interviews; observations
Contextual Conditions	Classroom atmosphere	The classroom atmosphere varied from directive to participatory depending on the lesson structure.	Observation field notes
	Time allocation	Time allocation between lecture and discussion varied across lessons.	Observation field notes
	Notable interactions	Observers recorded illustrative incidents such as extended student-led discussions.	Observation field notes

### Instructional Practices in Islamic Education Classrooms

Across both research sites, Islamic education lessons consistently began with lecture-based explanations of religious or moral concepts, as documented in classroom observations

and lesson plans. Teachers introduced doctrinal material related to ethics, worship, and moral obligations before transitioning to other instructional activities. In many observed lessons, this initial explanation was followed by guided discussion, during which teachers posed questions and invited student responses. These discussion sessions were recorded across grade levels in both schools. Teachers were also observed using contextual examples from students' daily lives, such as school behavior, peer relationships, or community norms, to illustrate abstract religious concepts. In addition, problem-based or reflective tasks were incorporated into lessons in both schools. These tasks included short written reflections, oral responses, or group discussions addressing hypothetical or real-life moral situations, as indicated in classroom observations and supporting instructional documents (see Table 2).

### **Teacher–Student Interaction Patterns**

Classroom interactions reflected several recurring patterns. Teachers regularly asked open-ended or reasoning-based questions, particularly during discussion segments following lectures. Students were frequently invited to explain or justify their responses, either individually or as part of group activities. Observation records show that teachers provided feedback or clarification, including restating student answers, correcting misunderstandings, or expanding on responses. In multiple observed sessions, teachers explicitly encouraged the expression of multiple viewpoints by acknowledging differing student responses before concluding discussions. These interactional practices were observed in both SMK NU Tulungagung and MA Al-Ma'arif Tulungagung and were documented consistently across classes (see Table 2).

### **Student Engagement during Classroom Activities**

Indicators of student engagement were evident during classroom instruction. Active participation in discussion was recorded when students responded to questions, volunteered comments, or contributed to group dialogue. Peer-to-peer interaction was observed during collaborative tasks and small-group discussions. Observers also documented instances where students demonstrated reflective or ethical consideration, such as referring to personal experiences or moral considerations when responding to questions. Additionally, student questions related to lesson content or moral issues were recorded in the field notes. These forms of engagement were observed in both school contexts and across grade levels (see Table 2).

### **Moral Reasoning Indicators in Classroom Practice**

Several indicators associated with moral reasoning were identified during classroom observations and interviews. Students were observed making references to ethical principles or Islamic religious values, including explicit mention of moral norms and religious teachings. In multiple instances, students provided justifications for actions or opinions, explaining why particular behaviors were considered appropriate or inappropriate.

Observation notes also captured moments of reflection on the consequences of actions, where students discussed potential outcomes of moral or immoral behavior. Furthermore, teachers and students were observed connecting religious teachings to real-life situations,

including daily routines, social interactions, or anticipated future responsibilities. These indicators were documented consistently across both schools (see Table 2).

### **Extracurricular and Religious Activities**

Beyond classroom instruction, both schools implemented structured extracurricular and religious activities related to Islamic education. Document analysis and interviews indicated regular participation in ritual practices, including prayer, ablution (wudu), tahlil, and the memorization of religious texts. Senior students were observed and reported to take on leadership roles in religious activities, including leading prayers or communal rituals. School records also documented student participation in religious competitions, both internal and external. These activities were formally scheduled and integrated into the schools' educational programs, as reflected in institutional documents (see Table 2).

### **Institutional Structures and Teacher Roles**

Institutional documents from both schools outlined cognitive and affective competency targets expected of students by grade and semester. These targets were reflected in lesson plans, activity schedules, and assessment records. Religious and moral education activities were formally scheduled and documented, indicating their institutionalized nature. Interviews and observations highlighted multiple teacher roles, including instructional guidance during classroom lessons, coaching and mentoring students for religious leadership and competitions, and monitoring student participation and progress in moral and religious activities. These roles were consistently reported and observed across both school settings (see Table 2).

### **Contextual Conditions of Learning**

Contextual observations indicated variation in the classroom atmosphere, ranging from directive to participatory, depending on the lesson structure and the teacher's approach. Time allocation between lecture and discussion varied across observed sessions and was recorded in observation logs. Observers also documented notable interactions or incidents, such as extended student-led discussions or spontaneous ethical questions, which were preserved in field notes for further analysis (see Table 2).

## **Discussion**

This study documented a coordinated set of educational practices across two Islamic secondary schools that together constitute an ecology for cultivating moral reasoning: instructional practices (lecture + guided discussion + reflective tasks), teacher–student interaction patterns (open questioning, justification, feedback), student engagement indicators (participation, peer interaction, reflective responses), moral-reasoning markers (ethical references, justifications, consequence awareness), structured extracurricular/religious activities, institutional competency articulation, and distinct teacher roles (guidance, coaching, monitoring). The discussion below synthesizes these descriptive

domains (Table 2) and interprets how they jointly enable moral reasoning, while comparing salient patterns across SMK NU (vocational) and MA Al-Ma'arif (general secondary).

### **Pedagogical scaffolds for moral reasoning**

The recurrent instructional pattern—an initial doctrinal exposition followed by guided discussion and problem-based/reflection tasks—functions empirically as a micro-sequence that moves students from content acquisition to justificatory practice (Table 2: Instructional Practices).<sup>21</sup> This micro-sequence aligns with contemporary evidence that deliberate opportunities for argumentation and perspective-taking promote development in moral cognition.<sup>22</sup> In particular, the observed use of open-ended questioning and invitations for students to explain or justify (Table 2: Teacher–Student Interaction) provides repeated practice in verbalizing reasons, a core mechanism identified by moral-development scholars as a means of shifting students toward more principled moral reasoning.<sup>23</sup>

Across the two sites, both schools incorporated these scaffolds. Where minor differences appeared, they were contextually situated. Observational logs and contextual notes indicated variation in classroom atmosphere and time allocation (Table 2: Contextual Conditions). In some sessions at MA Al-Ma'arif, instruction tended toward more sustained exegesis of texts before discussion; in some SMK NU classes, discussion segments appeared more tightly coupled with applied problem tasks. These contextual differences suggest that the same micro-sequence (lecture → discussion → reflection) can be instantiated with varying emphases depending on institutional orientation—an observation consistent with the literature emphasizing the contextual modulation of pedagogical effects.<sup>24</sup>

### **Integration of knowledge and practice**

The simultaneous presence of classroom deliberation and structured ritual/extracurricular practice (Table 2: Moral Reasoning Indicators; Extracurricular and Religious Activities) indicates that the schools create both cognitive and enactment opportunities for moral learning. Students not only articulated ethical principles in class but also enacted responsibilities (rituals, leadership roles, competitions) outside the classroom. This integrative pattern mirrors the empirical finding that moral reasoning more effectively mediates the relation between value instruction and prosocial action when reflection is coupled with opportunities for enactment.<sup>25</sup> In both schools, formal scheduling and

<sup>21</sup> NURUL FITRIAH ALIAS and Rafiza Abdul Razak, "Exploring the Pedagogical Aspects of Microlearning in Educational Settings: A Systematic Literature Review," *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction* 20 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.32890/mjli2023.20.2.3>.

<sup>22</sup> Killen and Dahl, "Moral Reasoning Enables Developmental and Societal Change."

<sup>23</sup> Killen and Dahl.

<sup>24</sup> Wali Khan Monib, Atika Qazi, and Rosyzie Anna Apong, "Microlearning beyond Boundaries: A Systematic Review and a Novel Framework for Improving Learning Outcomes," *Heliyon* 11, no. 2 (January 2025): e41413, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e41413>; Tommasi et al., "Enhancing Critical Thinking Skills and Media Literacy in Initial VET Students: A Mixed Methods Study on a Cross-Country Training Program"; Moh Salimi et al., "Rethinking Pedagogical Sequences: Exploring the Syntax of Research-Based Learning in Undergraduate Primary Teacher Education," *Salud, Ciencia y Tecnología* 5 (October 14, 2025): 2384, <https://doi.org/10.56294/saludcyt20252384>.

<sup>25</sup> Mohd Yusoff et al., "The Effect of Moral Reasoning and Values as the Mediator towards Student's Prosocial Behaviour."

competency articulation (Table 2: Institutional Structure) institutionalized these enactment opportunities, thereby increasing the likelihood of repeated practice and internalization.

While both sites exhibited this integration, there were contextual distinctions in emphasis. The vocational school context (SMK NU) often foregrounded applicability to daily routines and practical responsibilities—observations recorded more frequent references to conduct in workplace-adjacent scenarios—whereas the general secondary context (MA Al-Ma’arif) in some instances placed comparatively greater emphasis on textual understanding and doctrinal nuance before linking to practice. These patterns suggest differential curricular affordances: vocational environments may naturally invite applied framing that facilitates transfer to professional roles. At the same time, general secondary settings may privilege exegetical depth that supports conceptual clarity.<sup>26</sup> Both affordances are complementary for moral reasoning when deliberately connected.<sup>27</sup>

### Teacher mediation and institutionalization of competencies

Teachers at both schools served as mediators, coordinating doctrinal content, discussion routines, and enactment opportunities (Table 2: Teacher Roles). Their roles included providing feedback, coaching for leadership roles, and monitoring student progress—practices consistent with research showing that sustained teacher guidance is essential for students to transfer moral reasoning from classroom deliberation to real-world behavior.<sup>28</sup> The existence of written competency targets and scheduled activities (Table 2: Institutional Structure) further signals the institution's commitment to moral outcomes rather than to ad hoc or incidental moral instruction. Institutionalization through explicit competency articulation supports alignment across teachers, lessons, and extracurricular programs, a structural condition recognized as increasing the consistency of moral formation efforts.<sup>29</sup>

### Cross-site comparison

Compared with other sites, both sites share core mechanisms for fostering moral reasoning (dialogic instruction, enactment, teacher mediation, and institutional targets). Differences were primarily matters of emphasis and enactment rather than presence/absence. SMK NU's vocational orientation appeared to privilege applied examples and problem tasks that explicitly connected learning to action; MA Al-Ma’arif's general secondary orientation sometimes emphasized textual or doctrinal depth before application. These distinctions suggest complementary pathways to supporting moral reasoning:

<sup>26</sup> Abdul Muid and Nasrulloh Nasrulloh, "The Role of Education in the Formation of Character and Noble Morals from the Perspective of the Qur'an," *Journal of International Multidisciplinary Research* 2, no. 11 (November 23, 2024): 218–26, <https://doi.org/10.62504/jimr992>.

<sup>27</sup> U Abdullah Mu'min et al., "Strengthening Students' Islamic Character Education at SMK Jamiyyatul Aulad Palabuhanratu by Cultivating Morals, Ethics and Culture," *EDUKASI: Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan Agama Dan Keagamaan* 23, no. 1 (April 30, 2025): 91–106, <https://doi.org/10.32729/edukasi.v23i1.2166>; Tommasi et al., "Enhancing Critical Thinking Skills and Media Literacy in Initial VET Students: A Mixed Methods Study on a Cross-Country Training Program."

<sup>28</sup> Kotluk and Tormey, "The Impact of Varying Levels of Compassion in Ethics Education Case Studies on Students' Moral Reasoning."

<sup>29</sup> Tommasi et al., "Enhancing Critical Thinking Skills and Media Literacy in Initial VET Students: A Mixed Methods Study on a Cross-Country Training Program."

vocational framing that foregrounds application may strengthen transfer to professional conduct, while doctrinal depth may strengthen conceptual foundations for justification.<sup>30</sup> Together, these pathways point to a hybrid model in which doctrinal understanding, dialogic practice, and enacted responsibility are combined—consistent with the argument that moral education should integrate cognitive deliberation and affective/experiential elements to maximize both depth and transfer.<sup>31</sup>

### Methodological and practical implications

Methodologically, the cross-site, multi-source design allowed identification of recurrent mechanisms across institutional types while preserving context-sensitive differences (Table 2). Practically, the findings imply that curriculum designers and teacher educators in faith-based contexts can purposefully align lesson sequences, extracurricular enactments, and competency frameworks to create repeated opportunities for justificatory practice and enactment conditions identified in international literature as necessary for advancing moral reasoning.<sup>32</sup> Teacher professional development that emphasizes facilitating discussion, designing applied tasks, and coaching for leadership roles may be particularly consequential.<sup>33</sup>

The descriptive domains in Table 2 collectively suggest that moral reasoning can be cultivated when schooling environments purposefully combine reasoned dialogue, contextualized examples, practiced enactments, and institutional commitment to competency outcomes.<sup>34</sup> The two school types studied demonstrate that the mechanisms are portable across different institutional orientations, although their specific instantiations vary with contextual emphases. Future research employing longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs could assess the relative efficacy of the vocational-applied versus doctrinal-depth emphases for long-term moral reasoning development and behavioral transfer.

## CONCLUSION

This multi-site qualitative study examined how the Islamic concept of ‘*aql* (reason) is operationalized as moral reasoning within everyday school practice at two secondary institutions in Tulungagung, Indonesia: a vocational Islamic school (SMK NU) and a general Islamic senior secondary school (MA Al-Ma’arif). Empirical evidence from classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis indicates that moral reasoning is not an abstract ideal but a practicable capacity cultivated by an integrated pedagogical ecology. Key,

<sup>30</sup> Moh Romzi et al., “Integration of Islamic Teachings in Character Education to Strengthen Morality and Ethics in Schools,” *Maharot : Journal of Islamic Education* 8, no. 2 (December 31, 2024): 191, <https://doi.org/10.28944/maharot.v8i2.1809>.

<sup>31</sup> Kotluk and Tormey, “The Impact of Varying Levels of Compassion in Ethics Education Case Studies on Students’ Moral Reasoning”; Mohd Yusoff et al., “The Effect of Moral Reasoning and Values as the Mediator towards Student’s Prosocial Behaviour.”

<sup>32</sup> Killen and Dahl, “Moral Reasoning Enables Developmental and Societal Change.”

<sup>33</sup> Galo Enrique Vasquez Vasquez et al., “Neuroscientific Perspectives on the Influence of School Emotional Climate on the Development of Social-Emotional Skills in Primary Education,” *Journal of Posthumanism* 5, no. 6 (June 10, 2025): 2799–2807, <https://doi.org/10.63332/joph.v5i6.2398>; Uswatun Khasanah, “Islamic Education as a Foundation of Character: A Case Study of the Formation of Noble Morals in Students,” *JIE (Journal of Islamic Education)* 8, no. 2 (October 3, 2024): 294–309, <https://doi.org/10.52615/jie.v8i2.541>.

<sup>34</sup> Mary Monalisa Nainggolan and Lamhot Naibaho, “The Integration of Kohlberg Moral Development Theory with Education Character,” *Technium Social Sciences Journal* 31 (May 9, 2022): 203–12, <https://doi.org/10.47577/tssj.v31i1.6417>.

interlocking mechanisms within this ecology are: dialogic classroom instruction that moves students from exposition to justificatory practice; contextualized exemplars and problem-based tasks that link doctrine to lived situations; structured extracurricular enactments of religious values; sustained teacher mediation (feedback, coaching, supervision); and formal competency articulation embedded in curricula and schedules.

Although both sites exhibited these core mechanisms, their emphases differed: the vocational setting more frequently foregrounded applied problem-solving and responsibilities related to workplace or daily practice, while the general secondary setting placed greater emphasis on doctrinal explication prior to application. These complementary emphases suggest multiple, contextually shaped pathways for cultivating moral reasoning that remain grounded in shared pedagogical principles.

The findings practically support a model for faith-based curriculum design that aligns dialogic pedagogy, enacted practice, and institutional competency frameworks, and they point to the value of targeted teacher professional development in facilitation and coaching. Methodologically, the comparative, multi-site approach proved effective for identifying both recurrent mechanisms and contextual variation.

Limitations include the study's qualitative, context-bound design, which constrains causal inference and broad generalization. Future research should pursue longitudinal and mixed-methods designs to measure developmental change in moral reasoning, evaluate the relative effects of applied versus doctrinal emphases, and test the transferability of the proposed pedagogical model across diverse faith-based and secular settings.

## REFERENCES

- Abdul Muid, and Nasrulloh Nasrulloh. "The Role of Education in the Formation of Character and Noble Morals from the Perspective of the Qur'an." *Journal of International Multidisciplinary Research* 2, no. 11 (November 23, 2024): 218–26. <https://doi.org/10.62504/jimr992>.
- ALIAS, NURUL FITRIAH, and Rafiza Abdul Razak. "Exploring the Pedagogical Aspects of Microlearning in Educational Settings: A Systematic Literature Review." *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction* 20 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.32890/mjli2023.20.2.3>.
- Bekbayeva, Zhanar Sabyrovna, Temir Tlekovich Galiyev, Nazymgul Albytova, Zhazira Meirhanovna Zhazykbayeva, and Assem Bolatbekovna Mussatayeva. "Fostering Post-Secondary Vocational Students' Critical Thinking through Multi-Level Tasks in Learning Environments." *World Journal on Educational Technology: Current Issues* 13, no. 3 (July 31, 2021): 397–406. <https://doi.org/10.18844/wjet.v13i3.5948>.
- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "One Size Fits All? What Counts as Quality Practice in (Reflexive) Thematic Analysis?" *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 18, no. 3 (July 3, 2021): 328–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>.
- He, Jianbo, and Xianteng Luo. "On Cultivating Innovative Skilled Talents in Secondary Vocational Education Based on Dual Integration of Education with Industry and Science."

- International Journal of Education and Humanities* 18, no. 3 (March 14, 2025): 103–8. <https://doi.org/10.54097/bawqnk62>.
- Hicham Diouane, Muhammad K. Ridwan, Muhammad Zawil Kiram, and Abdalrahman Abulmajd. “The Dynamics of Islamic Thought in Responding to Contemporary Challenges.” *Bulletin of Islamic Research* 3, no. 4 (June 5, 2025): 671–86. <https://doi.org/10.69526/bir.v3i4.361>.
- Jacobson, Dan. “Naturalistic Inquiry.” In *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, 75:267–72. London: Elsevier, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-102295-5.10579-7>.
- Killen, Melanie, and Audun Dahl. “Moral Reasoning Enables Developmental and Societal Change.” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 16, no. 6 (November 23, 2021): 1209–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691620964076>.
- Kotluk, Nihat, and Roland Tormey. “Compassion and Engineering Students’ Moral Reasoning: The Emotional Experience of Engineering Ethics Cases.” *Journal of Engineering Education* 112, no. 3 (July 20, 2023): 719–40. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jee.20538>.
- Kotluk, Nihat, and Roland Tormey. “The Impact of Varying Levels of Compassion in Ethics Education Case Studies on Students’ Moral Reasoning.” *Journal of Moral Education*, October 17, 2024, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2024.2411962>.
- Lincoln, Yvonna S., Egon G. Guba, and Joseph J. Pilotta. “Naturalistic Inquiry.” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 9, no. 4 (January 1985): 438–39. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767\(85\)90062-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(85)90062-8).
- Mahmudulhassan, Mahmudulhassan, Muhammad Abuzar, Saif Uddin Ahmed Khondoker, and Jobeda Khanom. “The Integration of Islamic Epistemology in Ethical and Multicultural Education: Pedagogical Strategies and Challenges.” *Multicultural Islamic Education Review* 2, no. 2 (February 22, 2025). <https://doi.org/10.23917/mier.v2i2.7612>.
- Miles, M B, A M Huberman, and J Saldana. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. SAGE Publications, 2013. <https://books.google.co.id/books?id=p0wXBAAAQBAJ>.
- Mohd Yusoff, Mohd Zailani, Safrihsyah Safrihsyah, Mohamad Khairi Haji Othman, Iwan Fajri, Sufriadi Muhammad Yusuf, Ibrahim Ibrahim, and Wan Husna Wan Mohd Zain. “The Effect of Moral Reasoning and Values as the Mediator towards Student’s Prosocial Behaviour.” *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 27, no. 1 (December 31, 2022): 32–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2021.2021959>.
- Monib, Wali Khan, Atika Qazi, and Rosyzie Anna Apong. “Microlearning beyond Boundaries: A Systematic Review and a Novel Framework for Improving Learning Outcomes.” *Heliyon* 11, no. 2 (January 2025): e41413. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e41413>.
- Mu’min, U Abdullah, Malihah Al Azizah, Budi Munawar Khutomi, and Mahamadaree Waeno. “Strengthening Students’ Islamic Character Education at SMK Jamiyyatul Aulad Palabuhanratu by Cultivating Morals, Ethics and Culture.” *EDUKASI: Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan Agama Dan Keagamaan* 23, no. 1 (April 30, 2025): 91–106.

<https://doi.org/10.32729/edukasi.v23i1.2166>.

Naila Latif, Maria Haroon, Zuhaa Hassan, Sunbel Makhdoom, and Khadija Rehman. "Investigating the Correlation Between Moral Reasoning and Cognitive Development in High School Student." *ACADEMIA International Journal for Social Sciences* 4, no. 3 (August 5, 2025): 2369–85. <https://doi.org/10.63056/ACAD.004.03.0536>.

Nainggolan, Mary Monalisa, and Lamhot Naibaho. "The Integration of Kohlberg Moral Development Theory with Education Character." *Technium Social Sciences Journal* 31 (May 9, 2022): 203–12. <https://doi.org/10.47577/tssj.v31i1.6417>.

O'Brien, Bridget C., Ilene B. Harris, Thomas J. Beckman, Darcy A. Reed, and David A. Cook. "Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research." *Academic Medicine* 89, no. 9 (September 2014): 1245–51. <https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0000000000000388>.

Romzi, Moh, Shobihatul Fitroh Noviyanti, Tutik Hamidah, and Ahmad Fawaid. "Integration of Islamic Teachings in Character Education to Strengthen Morality and Ethics in Schools." *Maharot: Journal of Islamic Education* 8, no. 2 (December 31, 2024): 191. <https://doi.org/10.28944/maharot.v8i2.1809>.

Salimi, Moh, Ratna Hidayah, Karlimah Karlimah, and Laksmi Evasuf Widi Fajari. "Rethinking Pedagogical Sequences: Exploring the Syntax of Research-Based Learning in Undergraduate Primary Teacher Education." *Salud, Ciencia y Tecnología* 5 (October 14, 2025): 2384. <https://doi.org/10.56294/saludcyt20252384>.

Tommasi, Francesco, Andrea Ceschi, Sara Bollarino, Silvia Belotto, Silvia Genero, and Riccardo Sartori. "Enhancing Critical Thinking Skills and Media Literacy in Initial VET Students: A Mixed Methods Study on a Cross-Country Training Program." *International Journal for Research in Vocational Education and Training* 10, no. 2 (July 5, 2023): 239–57. <https://doi.org/10.13152/IJRVET.10.2.5>.

Tong, A., P. Sainsbury, and J. Craig. "Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ): A 32-Item Checklist for Interviews and Focus Groups." *International Journal for Quality in Health Care* 19, no. 6 (September 16, 2007): 349–57. <https://doi.org/10.1093/intqhc/mzm042>.

Tracy, Sarah J. "Qualitative Quality: Eight 'Big-Tent' Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Inquiry* 16, no. 10 (December 1, 2010): 837–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>.

Uswatun Khasanah. "Islamic Education as a Foundation of Character: A Case Study of the Formation of Noble Morals in Students." *JIE (Journal of Islamic Education)* 8, no. 2 (October 3, 2024): 294–309. <https://doi.org/10.52615/jie.v8i2.541>.

Vasquez, Galo Enrique Vasquez, Diana Carolina Ortiz-Delgado, Ximena Paz Martinez Oportus, Edwar Ferney Roldan Morales, Edwar Ferney Roldan Morales, and Cristina Vilatuna Clavijo. "Neuroscientific Perspectives on the Influence of School Emotional Climate on the Development of Social-Emotional Skills in Primary Education." *Journal of Posthumanism* 5, no. 6 (June 10, 2025): 2799–2807.

<https://doi.org/10.63332/joph.v5i6.2398>.

Wienmeister, Annett. "Moral Reasoning Skills: What They Are and How They Can Be Furthered in Health Professions Education." *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 28, no. 4 (December 21, 2025): 763–74. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11019-025-10289-0>.

Yin, R K. *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*. SAGE Publications, 2017. <https://books.google.co.id/books?id=uX1ZDwAAQBAJ>.

Žiha, Nikol. "Value Education in Law School Curriculum: Cultivating Moral Autonomy." *Pravni Vjesnik* 40, no. 1 (2024): 7–30. <https://doi.org/10.25234/pv/28586>.