

Cultivating *Adab* Through Leadership: How Educational Leaders Shape Islamic Character in Cambodian Tahfiz Boarding Schools

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Abstract

Muslim boarding schools in minority contexts play a crucial role in preserving religious identity and nurturing moral values beyond formal academic instruction. In Cambodia, where Muslims constitute a small minority, tahfiz boarding schools function as key institutions for cultivating *adab*, an Islamic concept encompassing moral character, ethical refinement, disciplined conduct, and moral responsibility. This qualitative case study examines leadership practices in two Cambodian tahfiz institutions, Maahad Tahfiz Darul Ulum Poipet and Maahad Tahfiz Darul Hadith Pemnok. Data were obtained from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with eight educational leaders and were supported by systematic non-participant observation. Thematic analysis produced nine major themes and 27 interrelated subthemes that collectively frame *adab* cultivation as a structured and intentional institutional process. The themes include leadership modeling, mentorship based moral guidance, relational bonding, calibrated praise, structured rewards, restorative discipline, character-centered programs, organizational prioritization of *adab*, and the pedagogical use of the boarding environment. While these strategies operate synergistically, leadership modeling, institutional commitment to *adab*, and restorative discipline emerged as the most influential and foundational practices. Findings indicate that effective *adab* development depends on sustained leadership commitment and systematic integration of character education into curriculum design, daily routines, and institutional policy, rather than treating it as supplementary instruction. By situating the study within broader discussions of Islamic educational leadership and minority Muslim schooling, this research offers policy relevant and curriculum based insights with comparable applicability to similar minority contexts. The study contributes empirically grounded evidence and proposes a replicable, leadership-driven model for sustainable values based on residential education.

Keywords: *Adab cultivation, Islamic character education, educational leadership, tahfiz boarding schools, Cambodian Muslim communities.*

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary international educational theory and philosophy increasingly recognize the inherent importance of developing character alongside intellectual ability as an essential part of the overall formation of the student. The greater emphasis represents a reaction to new panics regarding increasing school violence, youth behavioral disorders, and an overall disconnection from ethical anchors in multicultural communities (WHO, 2020; Tambak & Sukenti, 2025). Character education, previously relegated to add-on educational domains, is today a central concern of holistic models of student development. In Islamic education, this ethical duty is actualized in the concept of *adab*, which is a complex system that includes not just behavioral courtesy but also the dialectical synthesis of ethical behavior, intellectual knowledge, and religio-spiritual consciousness (Al-Attas, 1984). Great Islamic minds, particularly Al-Attas (1981, 1999), view *adab* as integral to *ta'dib* or the comprehensive process of disciplining the soul, body, and intellect toward moral and intellectual excellence. Contemporary Islamic pedagogical scholarship reiterates *adab* as a categorical marker of educational attainment, transcending academically articulated indicators to encompass moral and religious refinement (Badrasawi et al., 2018).

Recent empirical studies validate such pedagogical emphasis, depicting how Islamic educators conceptualize their professional activity not as mere delivery of knowledge but as *muaddib*, who are moral models that assist in cultivating character through a structured daily routine of the day's religious activities and strict behavioral reinforcement (Tambak & Sukenti, 2025; Arman, 2025). This aligns with findings that frame teachers in Islamic boarding schools as moral agents whose leadership directly shapes the cultivation of *adab* (Buang, 2017), and that character education in tahfiz schools depends heavily on how such leadership is structured (Ahmad et al., 2018). In boarding school environments, especially tahfiz schools, this function takes on greater importance since these settings offer intense environments in which learning coexists with ongoing moral guidance and in which each interpersonal interaction is harnessed as an opportunity to develop *adab*. The residential boarding school model offers unique affordances for systematic character education. As opposed to traditional day schools, the ongoing presence of educational staff allows for real-time mentorship, instant behavioral correction, and constant character development (Fathil, 2017). This prolonged proximity creates what can be termed a "living curriculum," where formal academic learning and informal character development become porous. As Arman (2025) notes, residential institutions of religion serve various functions, such as educational advancement, social integration, and identity reinforcement, particularly among marginalized or minority groups.

In Cambodia, where Muslims represent a minor Islamic community and still grapple with structural barriers to quality religious education, tahfiz boarding schools have increasingly taken center stage in roles such as cultural preservation, moral formation, and religious continuity. At present, available reports on Islamic education in Cambodia suggest that many community-based madrasah and tahfiz institutions face inadequate resources and maintain a high dependency on local leadership to uphold standards of discipline and character development. For instance, the Cambodia Muslim Development Foundation (CMDF) reports and Hassan (2020) provide insight into the conditions pertaining to Islamic education in Cambodia. However, far fewer studies have explicitly focused on *adab*-oriented leadership or school leadership practices in Cambodian tahfiz settings. This is despite regional evidence that distinctly indicates that leadership approaches in Southeast Asian tahfiz schools have noteworthy implications for promoting students' discipline, moral behavior, and motivation (e.g., Nordin & Ismail, 2019b; Rahman, 2021). Being the minority in a non-Muslim country like Cambodia, the Islamic/Muslim community must uphold its values and identity so that it will not vanish over time. Hence, it is integral to highlight the practices of these Islamic education institutions as they document the progress of Islamic education in Cambodia.

Against this backdrop, institutions like Maahad Tahfiz Darul Ulum (MTDU) Poipet and Maahad Tahfiz Darul Hadith (MTDH) Pemnok have been highly regarded for combining Qur'anic memorisation with systematic behaviour modification and structured *adab* training. Initial observations and community reports indicate that numerous students entered these schools with documented behavioural difficulties but later emerged with significant improvements in moral conduct, disciplinary consistency, and academic ambitions, including eventual entrance to internationally recognized Islamic universities. Despite such promising results, however, little scholarly attention has been given to exactly how school leaders in Cambodian tahfiz boarding environments foster such transformation. This study is, therefore, positioned to address this research gap.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study examines the specific mechanisms through which principals in MTDU and MTDH cultivate *adab* among students. Conceptually guided by classical Islamic models of moral education, such as Ibn Miskawayh's frameworks of praise, reprimand, and graduated moral habituation, and also by contemporary perspectives on educational leadership, such as Hallinger's (2010) instructional leadership model, the present study explores how intentional leadership behaviors, pedagogic strategies, and institutional routines coalesce into observable moral development outcomes through an analysis of interview and observational data. This research, therefore, addresses the evident gap in the literature by: (1) extending current knowledge on Islamic character education among minority Muslim communities, which has received scant empirical attention in Cambodia; (2) clarifying how ethical and instructional leadership functions in reforming the behavioural patterns of students within religious residential schooling; and (3) theorizing practical, evidence-based models for integrating systematic *adab* development into modern Islamic educational practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundations of Islamic Character Education

The cultivation of *adab*, which broadly encompasses Islamic manners, moral conduct, and religious discipline, serves as an essential element of Islamic pedagogy. In contrast with secular character education models, which too frequently treat moral development as a second-order add-on to intellectual learning, Islamic pedagogy makes ethical cultivation a central component of the educational process. As Al-Attas (1981) explains, Islamic education is more than the transmission of knowledge: it involves the comprehensive polishing of the soul, mind, and behavior by means of *ta'dib* or the methodical disciplining of the self. This paradigm views students as moral beings whose character must be developed in tandem with intellectual development, specifically within definite developmental phases when patterns of behavior and attitudinal dispositions are most fluid.

Indeed, Islamic education has always placed moral formation at the heart of its pedagogical philosophy by positioning *adab* (i.e., the embodiment of ethical behavior, intellectual discipline, and spiritual consciousness) as the ultimate outcome of learning. For instance, classical scholars like Al-Attas (1981; 1991) argue that Islamic education, *ta'dib*, is not merely the transfer of knowledge but a holistic disciplining of mind, soul, and conduct. *Adab* thus represents the harmonization of correct action, proper understanding, and moral self-regulation.

Ibn Miskawayh's *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq* represents one of the earliest formal Islamic psychological theories of moral development, which focuses on praise, encouragement, light reproach, and gradual habituation as central mechanisms in the training of character (Ibn Miskawayh, 1968, 2001). It is the author's firm belief that the educator should gradually develop the student's

moral habits, relying not on compulsion but rather on emotional susceptibility and example. Al-Ghazali indicates in *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* how moral education assumes constant companionship, imitation of models of righteousness, and regular habits that would purify the soul (Al-Ghazali, 2005).

Ibn Miskawayh's theory of cultivating *adab* is most fully articulated in his seminal ethical treatise *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq wa Tathīr al-A'rāq* (Refinement of Character and Purification of Dispositions). Recognized in modern scholarship as a foundational figure in Islamic virtue ethics, Miskawayh presents a structured account of moral formation that integrates philosophical psychology, rational discipline, moral habituation, and spiritual aspiration. His ethical system draws upon Greek philosophical traditions, especially Aristotelian moderation, while embedding them within an Islamic moral and metaphysical framework (Fakhry, 1978; Santalia & Awal, 2023; Daiber, 2024). Cultivating *adab* in his framework is not limited to etiquette or outward comportment. Rather, it signifies the deep refinement of the human soul through education, reason, moderation, and spiritual orientation. The dimensions of this cultivation may be analytically organized into interconnected psychological, intellectual, moral, educational, and spiritual components.

Miskawayh begins his ethical analysis with the structure of the human soul. He identifies distinct faculties within the soul that must be harmonized under rational governance. Moral failure occurs when appetite or anger dominates reason. Moral excellence, by contrast, arises when the rational faculty regulates and orders the lower faculties in accordance with discernment and balance. Modern studies confirm that Miskawayh defines moral character as a stable disposition formed through repeated habituation until virtuous action becomes spontaneous rather than forced (Santalia & Awal, 2023). Comparative philosophical analysis shows that he locates within the soul a power of knowledge capable of regulating anger and desire and enabling ethical discernment (Syamsuddin, 2017). Cultivating *adab* therefore begins with self-awareness and the disciplined reordering of internal faculties.

For Miskawayh, the intellect plays a central governing role in ethical life. Wisdom emerges when reason successfully guides the individual toward right judgment and appropriate action. Ethical formation thus requires strengthening the intellectual faculty so that it can evaluate circumstances, distinguish good from evil, and determine the proper course of action. Scholarly comparison between Miskawayh and al-Ghazali indicates that Miskawayh emphasizes the processes of thought and rational evaluation in shaping moral character (Syamsuddin, 2017). Contemporary analysis of his relevance for ethical education further highlights that right conduct must be grounded in logical reasoning and reflective judgment (Ulfah et al., 2024). In this sense, cultivating *adab* involves developing intellectual maturity alongside emotional discipline.

At the heart of Miskawayh's ethics lies the principle of moderation. Each faculty of the soul has two extremes: one of excess and one of deficiency. Virtue occupies the balanced middle between these extremes. Temperance lies between indulgence and insensibility. Courage lies between cowardice and recklessness. Wisdom lies between rashness and foolishness. Justice emerges when these virtues are harmoniously integrated. Research on his ethical system consistently emphasizes this middle position as the defining principle of moral excellence (Santalia & Awal, 2023). The cultivation of *adab* therefore requires disciplined habituation so that moderation becomes a stable disposition rather than an occasional effort. Justice in this framework is not merely legal fairness, but the equilibrium of the soul under rational guidance.

Miskawayh views moral refinement as an educational process. Human beings possess natural capacities that can be shaped and improved through instruction, guidance, praise, correction, and sustained training. The purpose of education, according to scholarly analysis, is the formation of an essentially noble personality rather than superficial status or accidental honor (Matanari, 2021). Miskawayh rejects isolation from society as a means of achieving virtue. Instead, ethical development must occur within communal life, since justice, friendship, and cooperation are integral to human flourishing (Santalia & Awal, 2023). Cultivating *adab*, therefore, requires structured moral education embedded in social interaction.

Although rational and systematic, Miskawayh's ethical vision ultimately points toward spiritual elevation. His work, also known as *Kitāb Ṭahārat al Nafs*, presents moral refinement as the purification of the soul and preparation for closeness to God. Ethical discipline becomes a path toward inner contentment and alignment with divine attributes such as justice and wisdom. Recent scholarship underscores that his ethical handbook integrates practical virtue with spiritual aspiration and presents moral development as a journey toward the soul's higher origin (Daiber, 2024). Love, friendship, and justice are not merely social goods but reflections of a divinely grounded moral order. Cultivating *adab* thus unites rational ethics with spiritual teleology.

Contemporary Islamic educational scholarship continues to uphold these classical positions. Badrasawi et al. (2018) affirm that moral development is one of the key objectives of Islamic pedagogy, while Hashim and Tamuri (2010) underscore that Islamic teachers serve as *muaddib*-moral models who are responsible for developing the ethical behavior of students. Recent works indicate that *adab* development becomes more effective when teachers practice the moral values being taught, demonstrate emotional restraint, and incorporate Islamic morality in their daily dealings with others (Tambak & Sukenti, 2025; Sanusi & Sukari, 2025).

Beyond Islamic literature, broader character education research resonates with these assertions. For example, Lickona (1992) asserted that the most potent way to develop character is through visible adult modelling, emotional bonding, and consistent reinforcement. Berkowitz (2012) adds that moral internalization is developed through contextualised practice, relational trust, and shared community values. Such resonances at once affirm that *adab* development shares commonalities with global theories of character education and simultaneously lends Islamic moral pedagogy cultural specificity and universality.

Boarding School Settings and Character Formation

Boarding school environments possess a specific affordance for continuous character development due to prolonged student–teacher interactions and the immersive nature of the educational setting. As Dewey (1916) suggests, education occurs best through lived experiences, and this becomes all the more apparent in Islamic boarding schools where daily routines become moral lessons themselves. Studies across Southeast Asia confirm that Islamic boarding schools (i.e., *pesantren*, *madrasah*, *tahfiz* institutions) inculcate discipline, humility, and cooperation through programmed routines, congregational worship, and shared responsibilities (Zuhdi, 2018). Norlizah et al. (2015) also report that memorization-based discipline in *tahfiz* schools reinforces self-regulation and enriches behavioural control. According to Fathil (2017), in residential Islamic schools, role modelling leads to a “living curriculum” whereby moral values are imparted implicitly through constant observation.

Arroisi et al. (2025) show how contemporary Islamic boarding schools successfully bridge the gap between intellectual achievement and moral development via the inclusion of value-based activities within academic life. Salsabila et al. (2025) confirm that elements of the curriculum, which incorporate Islamic history, ethics, and civic responsibility, contribute the most to *adab* development across cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains. This is further corroborated by research in minority-Muslim contexts. For instance, in the provinces of Pattani and Yala, Thailand, Muslim boarding schools facilitate identity maintenance and the cultivation of discipline in contexts in which Islamic education is not state-supported (Liow, 2009; Wekke et al., 2019). Similarly, for Bangsamoro Muslim communities in the Philippines, an Islamic residential school serves as the chief institution for moral rehabilitation and the continuity of identity (Milligan, 2020). The literature is replete with examples showing that boarding schools, because of their structure, continuity, and holistic pedagogical environment, are ideal sites for moral and behavioral transformation. Yet, as discussed later, Cambodia's case remains largely absent from this body of literature.

Educational Leadership and Character Development

In educational institutions, leadership may be seen as the major factor in establishing a school culture, student behavior, and moral climate. In Islamic educational settings, leadership encompasses administrative management as well as spiritual guidance and ethical modeling. Leaders in Islamic schools are expected to model Islamic virtues, influence student behavior through personal example, and implement pedagogical strategies that cultivate moral discipline. Studies in Malaysia have demonstrated solid associations between principal leadership and student discipline in *tahfiz* schools. In this regard, Nordin and Ismail (2019a) show that ethical leadership practices, in the form of visible role modelling, consistent moral messaging, and relational engagement, enhance students' internalization of *adab*. Mokhtar and Mohd Yusof (2021) further illustrate that *tahfiz* leaders who practice compassionate discipline, while maintaining emotional closeness and reinforcing institutional values, make a great contribution to improved student behavior.

Leadership in pesantren settings also uses moral exemplarity. Researchers agree that leadership in pesantren forms moral norms through routines, rituals, and direct mentorship (Sartini, 2025; Samiyono et al., 2026; Supriani et al., 2023). Puspita (2025) and Fadli and Maswita (2025) point out that relational proximity within a leader-student relationship is a key driver of moral influence, especially when leaders take on surrogate roles as parents, mentors, and spiritual guides. Hallinger's (2010) instructional leadership model provides further explanatory power: leaders influence student outcomes not only through curriculum management but through shaping the school's moral tone, expectations, and social environment (Bush, 2018). From an Islamic interpretation, instructional leadership becomes intertwined with ethical leadership, whereby school principals act as role models of self-discipline, humility, and emotional control. Yet despite the variety of topics, one issue unites them all: that *adab*-based leadership lies at the heart of effective moral education in Islamic schools. Foundational work has long linked Islamic educational leadership to moral development (Hashim & Langgung, 2008), and more recent systematic reviews confirm leadership as central to *tahfiz* school functioning (Nawawi & Abdullah, 2020). While this relationship has been well documented in Malaysia, Indonesia, and other Muslim-majority contexts, it remains largely unexamined in Cambodia itself.

Minority Context Considerations

For Muslim minority communities, religiously affiliated schools often also serve as sites for the preservation of identity, fostering social cohesion, and moral formation. Research into the education of minority Muslims in Southeast Asia has increased, although the Cambodian context remains underrepresented. Studies on Cambodian Muslims indicate a number of structural problems: a shortage of trained Islamic teachers, fragmented school systems, scarce financial resources, and a reliance on religious institutions driven at the community level (Sok et al., 2025; Rahmi et al., 2025; Math et al., 2024; Subyany, 2025). According to the Cambodian Muslim Development Foundation (CMDf), many Islamic schools have not formalised leadership models, while structured character education programs are rare. Yet such schools are often obligated to receive problematic or troubled youth, including those with behavioural issues.

In the case of other minority contexts in Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines, these studies identify the role of Islamic school leaders as cultural guardians, moral reformers, and community stabilizers (Liow, 2009; Wekke et al., 2019; Tan, 2014). These findings remind one that, in minority settings, school leadership assumes extended responsibilities beyond pedagogical—oftentimes, substituting for family structures or broader communal support. Thus, Cambodian *tahfiz* schools operate in a complex minority environment where leadership is crucial for moral development. Despite their importance, no empirical studies have been conducted on the practice of leadership in Cambodian *tahfiz* or Islamic boarding schools.

Research Gap and Study Justification

Although there is considerable research on Islamic character education, moral pedagogy, and leadership within Malaysian and Indonesian *tahfiz* and *pesantren* systems, empirical literature about institutions of a similar nature in Cambodia remains virtually nonexistent. Research in Malaysia and Indonesia consistently indicates that school leadership plays a crucial role in influencing students' discipline, motivation, and moral internalization (Hashim & Tamuri, 2010; Nordin & Ismail, 2019b; Mokhtar & Mohd Yusof, 2021; Zuhdi, 2018). Such studies provide detailed accounts of how principals utilize moral modelling, targeted mentoring, restorative discipline, and structured routines to instil *adab*. However, such mechanisms driven by leadership have yet to be studied methodically in the Cambodian context, despite the fact that minority Muslim communities in Cambodia face unique challenges.

Current research on Cambodian Muslims focuses primarily on questions of identity, marginalisation, historical trauma, and political exclusion (Osman, 2010, 2016, 2017; Ysa, 2016; Matthews, 2019), but little, if any, on the internal operations of Islamic schools or the dynamics of school leadership. Community organisational reports and NGOs have pointed out consistent structural shortcomings in Islamic education, such as structural limitations, including a lack of teacher training, formalised leader training, and reliance on community volunteers (CMDf 2019; Che Noh & Abu Bakar, 2021). These reports fail to capture empirically how school leaders in *tahfiz* schools manage discipline, foster *adab*, or support students with challenging behaviour. Scholarly reviews of Islamic education across Southeast Asia confirm that Cambodia is decidedly under-researched, particularly in areas of leadership and moral pedagogy (Arar et al., 2022; Afi & Mat, 2025; Subyany, 2025). Such reviews note an obvious lack regarding the actual operation of Islamic educational leadership in Muslim-minority and post-conflict societies, wherein the schools are not just places of education but essential safe spaces for cultural and moral development.

To date, no study has explored how classical Islamic moral education frameworks, such as the character-training principles described in Ibn Miskawayh (1968, 2001), are applied within Cambodian *tahfiz* boarding schools, nor how instructional leadership theories such as Hallinger's (2010) model play out within these specific religious and cultural contexts. This lack of academic research is highly problematic, considering that Cambodian *tahfiz* boarding schools like MTDU and MTDH have earned reputations within their respective communities for rehabilitating students who previously had behavioural problems and setting them on paths of good moral behavior and achieving academic goals. However, the processes involved in such changes have not been documented or reported academically. Therefore, a significant conceptual and empirical gap remains in determining how educational leaders of Cambodian *tahfiz* boarding schools intentionally develop *adab*, organize behavioural change, and utilize residential settings to achieve moral development. This research fills this gap by reporting the first ever in-depth empirical investigation into *adab*-based practices of leaders in two Cambodian *tahfiz* institutions and, in so doing, informs new knowledge in the scholarship of Islamic education, minority Muslim studies, and leadership studies within faith-based residential schooling.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative exploratory case study design to explore how educational leaders in two *tahfiz* boarding schools cultivate *adab*, or Islamic character, among their students in Cambodia. Only a qualitative approach would suffice to provide deep and rich insights into the lived experiences and perceptions that form part of the complex social circumstances involved in the character development processes, which quantitative methods cannot capture. Thus, a case study research design was chosen (Yin, 2011) because it best suits the in-depth investigation of a contemporary phenomenon, namely *adab* development, in a real-life context where the boundaries between the

phenomenon and the setting are not clearly defined (Creswell, 2009). The design allowed for an in-depth study of advanced strategies in leadership, institutional practices, and interpersonal relationships as they naturally unfold within educational settings.

Two of the most important Cambodian tahfiz institutions, Maahad Tahfiz Darul Ulum Poipet (MTDU) and Maahad Tahfiz Darul Hadith Pemnok (MTDH), were selected as cases in this study. These institutions were selected because they have a reputation for successfully reforming students with documented disciplinary issues into well-mannered and disciplined individuals. They both operate immersive residential models with highly managed environments that are uniquely conducive to intensive character development, making them ideal settings for studying the influence of educational leadership on adab formation.

Research Setting

Data were gathered at two tahfiz boarding institutions in Cambodia, which are Maahad Tahfiz Darul Ulum Poipet (MTDU) and Maahad Tahfiz Darul Hadith Pemnok (MTDH). These institutions were selected because they have been reported to successfully reform students with disciplinary issues into well-mannered and disciplined individuals. Both institutions operate residential models with managed environments that are particularly conducive to intensive character development; thus, they are the best settings for studying the influence of educational leadership on adab development.

Researcher Description

This study was shaped by the experiences and perspectives of two researchers, each bringing different forms of knowledge to the exploration of how educational leaders cultivate adab and Islamic character in Cambodian tahfiz boarding schools. The primary researcher completed a master's degree in Educational Management and Leadership and currently works as a lecturer and programme head at an international university. Years of teaching and researching student motivation and learning behaviour had nurtured a deep interest in how leaders influence students' growth both academically and morally. Entering this study, the primary researcher brought a natural curiosity about how leadership functions in religious residential schools and how character is formed in environments different from mainstream institutions. At the same time, the researcher was aware that these professional experiences could shape expectations about what "effective" leadership should look like. To avoid allowing these assumptions to overshadow participants' voices, the researcher used open-ended interviewing techniques and regular discussions with the research team to remain grounded in what the leaders and students themselves shared.

The second researcher, a final-year bachelor's student in Islamic Studies, brought a more personal connection to the setting. Having spent several years working in a *tahfiz* school in Cambodia, this researcher understood the day-to-day rhythms of boarding school life, including the routines of memorization, the emphasis on *adab*, and the close bond between students and their teachers. This familiarity helped the team navigate cultural nuances and understand practices that might otherwise be overlooked. At the same time, the researcher recognized the need to maintain a certain distance from personal memories and experiences. To manage this, the second researcher engaged in reflective conversations with the primary researcher, intentionally stepping back to ensure that interpretations were based on the data rather than past experiences.

Together, the two researchers complemented one another: one approached the study through the lens of educational leadership and student development more broadly, and the other offered lived experience within the tahfiz environment. Their combined perspectives helped build a richer understanding of how leaders in Cambodian tahfiz boarding schools shape the development of *adab* and Islamic character, while reflexive practices ensured that both researchers remained attentive, self-aware, and committed to representing participants' experiences authentically.

Research Participants

Eight educational leaders participated in this study—four from MTDU and four from MTDH—comprising student affairs officers, head teachers, vice principals, and school principals. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling, a technique suited to gathering rich qualitative findings from individuals directly involved in the studied phenomenon (Etikan et al., 2016). Selection criteria included direct involvement in student behaviour development, daily interaction with students in both formal and informal settings, and a minimum of three years of service at the institution.

METHODS AND INSTRUMENT

Data Collection Methods

Data were gathered through two complementary qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight educational leaders directly involved in student behaviour development, including principals, vice principals, and student affairs officers. The flexible interview format, informed by classical Islamic pedagogical models, encouraged participants to share rich experiences and reflections on *adab* cultivation. Questions were guided by Ibn Miskawayh's themes of praise, encouragement, modeling, and moral warnings (Ibn Miskawayh, 1968, 2001), as well as institutional routines and environmental factors that supported moral development. Interviews were conducted in Cham for linguistic and cultural appropriateness, then translated into English, with bilingual teachers reviewing the translations to preserve the meaning intended by the participants.

Non-Participant Observation

The second method, non-participant observation, allowed the researchers to witness leaders' routines and practices for influencing student behaviour within the schools' communal and instructional life, capturing natural interactions and disciplinary culture in situ. Unlike participant observation—where the researcher actively joins the group under study—this approach enables the present researchers to gather unlimited first-hand data directly from the setting without interfering with or influencing the subjects (Kawulich, 2005). Observations were recorded both on video and in writing to ensure accuracy.

Research Instrument: Interview Protocol

A detailed interview protocol was designed and subsequently communicated to participants beforehand to address ethical and legal considerations and ensure they understood the process and expected outcomes. The 12 interview questions were designed to address the study's three research questions. They are listed below:

- 1) During work at the school, what are your roles in shaping or developing students' *adab*?
- 2) Are there any other roles you play in order to help shape students' *adab*?
- 3) What are the activities, daily, weekly, monthly, or yearly, designed by the educational leaders in the school to shape students' behaviour?
- 4) As a warden / teacher / principal, what have you done to contribute to shaping the students' *adab*?
- 5) Describe your opinion on the effectiveness of what you have done so far in shaping students' *adab*.

- 6) What have you done independently to increase the effectiveness of *adab* shaping process by the school?
- 7) Is there any training you received for shaping students' *adab* and if there is, can you describe the training?
- 8) How does the boarding school environment help you shape students' *adab* better than a daily school?
- 9) Describe any external challenges faced during the *adab* cultivation process.
- 10) Are there any internal problems faced by you, your colleagues, or maybe superior?
- 11) So far, how do you address the challenges and problems?
- 12) Do you think there is more that can be done by you or other parties to cultivate *adab* in students?

DATA ANALYSIS

Data-Analytic Strategies

Interview transcripts were subjected to thematic content analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model: familiarization with data, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and analytical writing. This method effectively elicited patterns and strategies that school leaders used to develop student *adab*, with codes converging into themes of behavioural modelling, religious rituals, emotional bonding, and structured reinforcement. To ensure analytic rigor, member checking was employed, whereby participants reviewed transcripts and interpretations for accuracy, and themes were cross-checked against Islamic educational philosophy frameworks to establish consistency between empirical findings and conceptual foundations. Observation notes were similarly analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase model, with emerging codes integrated into the broader thematic framework developed from the interview data.

Methodological Integrity

Credibility of the research was ensured through data source triangulation (observations and interviews), prolonged involvement in observation sessions, and participant checking of interview transcripts. Transferability was made possible through detailed descriptions of the research context, participant selection criteria, and institutional routines. Ethical clearance was obtained, and informed consent was sought from all the participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process.

FINDINGS

The findings presented here address the research question of exploring how educational leaders build students' *adab* in boarding school contexts. From eight semi-structured interviews with educational leaders and systematic non-participant observations across MTDU and MTDH, the findings present a prevalent and intentional model of *adab* development framed around eight overarching themes emerging from both data sources.

Theme 1: Leading by Example: Embodied Moral Pedagogy

The most frequently mentioned practice that came out of both the interviews and the observations was modeling behavior by educational leaders as an embodied moral pedagogy. Interviewees reiterated how their own behavior should directly emanate from and mirror the values they seek to instill in their students. This includes punctuality in religious observance, courtesy in conversation, discipline in practices, and control over emotions.

As one leader mentioned, *"If we ask the students to be disciplined, then we must be the first ones to show disciplined practices, especially in our religious observance and commitment to time."*

More often than not, students witnessed teachers humbly involving themselves in communal life: cleaning the grounds where the children say their prayers, hugging them, and participating in every activity within school premises as concrete examples of humility and shared responsibility. Indeed, this has had a profound effect on students, as recalled by a principal:

"Students watch everything. They were surprised to see me, the principal, sweeping the prayer hall with them. One [student] told me, 'Ustaz, you showed us that humility is more important than status.'"

This is supported by the observation that educational leaders are always the first to initiate things, and then students would follow. From the interview, one of the respondents also expressed this most succinctly by stating, *"Teachers are not always heard, but always seen,"* suggesting that moral leadership within this context is very much a question of visibility and integrity. In fact, this result falls exactly in line with Al-Attas' (1984) conceptualization of *ta'dib* as a personification of value transmission--the actual character training takes place by way of observing excellence in the character of one's leaders.

In addition to their presence, educational leaders were deliberate in their role modeling in a moral and spiritual sense, offering direct guidance and advice. This was particularly evident in the post-prayer sessions when teachers led small groups (*halaqah*) in discussions about behavioral problems and helped students think deeply about choices concerning morality. Those interviewed reported such moments as especially valuable for intervention and support.

"We don't simply punish them. In the post-prayer halaqah, we always remind them that our aim is to 'shape the heart before shaping the mind.' We guide them to understand the divine reason for the adab they practice," explained one interviewee.

Rather than delivering dictatorial instructions, teachers at every turn patiently explained the rationale behind behavioral expectations, often contextualizing behavior in terms of long-term personal growth and Islamic values. Non-participatory observations revealed how teachers regularly devoted time outside class to engaging in one-on-one conversations with students on both academic and non-academic issues as a means of encouraging moral deliberation with discipline. The habits demonstrate Ibn Miskawayh's call to character betterment through sympathetic guidance rather than dictatorial correction.

Theme 2: Building Connections: Relational Foundation for Moral Influence

Strategic student-educational leader interpersonal relationships were found to be the key to moral character formation. Interview data showed that teachers made a conscious effort to position themselves as paternal figures, siblings, or mentors, particularly because many of the students were far away from their families. Several participants confirmed that *"emotional closeness invites moral influence,"* evidenced by teachers' engagement with students through physical contact, personal questioning, and discriminating humor. One leader articulated the necessity of this close bond, stating:

"If the student doesn't trust you as a father figure, he will never listen to your moral warning. We have to break that professional distance so the guidance is accepted as love, not just a rule."

This relational foundation was seen as essential for addressing the often-difficult cases, as it fostered a willingness among students to open up about their struggles. Another interviewee highlighted the contrast with formal schooling:

"In a regular school, the teacher just teaches and leaves. Here, we live with them. I found that a simple question about their well-being, like 'Are you sleeping well today?' opens the door to discuss bigger problems, like their bad habits or discipline issues."

Based on the non-participatory observation findings, it can be safely agreed that students were comfortable with the teachers, and there were respectful conversations between them. When students asked for advice, they always received the answer(s). The relational intimacy promoted caring conditions that are based on emotional responsibility and openness to correction. Moreover, the boarding environment itself actually magnified the impact of ongoing interaction in everyday routines.

Theme 3: Praise and Recognition: Strategic Positive Reinforcement

As positive reinforcement, strategic praise and public recognition acted as a conscious component of both schools' moral agenda. During observed usrah lessons and school assemblies, students were praised and acknowledged for noteworthy actions, such as leading cleanliness initiatives by example and encouraging younger classmates. Teachers also categorized these behaviors as "*akhlaq mulia*" (noble behavior), framing praise in Islamic terminologies and religious reward. One of the educational leaders emphasized the effectiveness of this approach:

"It is not enough just to say 'Good job.' We must explain that what they did like helping the younger students without being asked is an act of ihsan (excellence) in the sight of Allah. This gives the recognition deeper meaning than just a temporary compliment."

Furthermore, recognition was strategically used to create a desire for positive emulation among peers. Another interviewee described how they leverage public acknowledgment:

"When we praise one student publicly for their diligence or good manners, it becomes a stimulus for the others. We found that this kind of recognition provokes the desire to imitate good deeds more effectively than any direct lecture on morality."

Interview results also showed that praise and acknowledgments acted as stimuli that recognized behavior and provoked imitation by others. One teacher explained: *"When we praise one, others silently hope to become next."* This tradition echoes Ibn Miskawayh's idea that praising goodness actually initiates admiration and aspiration in moral groups.

Theme 4: Reward and Incentives: Structured Incentive Schemes

Observation and interview data also managed to capture rewards as incentives for promoting consistency in students' moral behavior. Special tasks, certificates, and the choice for school representation were utilized to reward students who demonstrate good model *adab*. The observation notes also indicated that a student was publicly acknowledged and was asked to lead a school cleaning project due to his diligence in helping an ill classmate. This showed the acknowledgement that brought rewards to students' good deeds. One interviewee detailed the thought process behind the selection of rewards:

"We are careful not to use money or expensive gifts. Our rewards are usually related to responsibility or service, like being chosen to represent the school at an event or leading the zikr circle. This teaches them that good character earns you trust and a higher place in service, which is the true Islamic reward."

Another participant explained how institutional roles were used to reinforce moral behavior over intellectual ability:

"If a student is chosen to be the class monitor, it is never just because he gets the highest marks. His good manners must be the first qualification. We use those roles to show everyone that adab is the most valued currency here."

The participants clarified that while such rewards were beneficial, they were short-term strategies that helped foster intrinsic motivation rather than long-term external reliance. The practice is in line with Berkowitz's (2012) model of character development, where the application of rewards is suggested to facilitate value internalization rather than substituting for internal moral responsibility.

Theme 5: Punishments and Warnings: Restorative Disciplinary Approaches

While highlighting positive actions, both institutions also instituted moderate corrective actions when the students transgressed in behavior. The findings of the interviews revealed that punishment had been framed as *tazkirah* (reminder) rather than retaliation. Students were assigned Qur'anic verse memorization and reflection on humility, patience, or respect. In serious cases, they were tasked to write essays on *adab* or perform community service. One interviewee explained the restorative philosophy:

"The moment of correction is actually the most important moment of teaching. We do not use corporal punishment. Instead, we give them a task related to what they lacked. For example, if a student was arrogant, they might be asked to clean the common areas quietly for three days and reflect on their attitude."

Furthermore, the process of correction was often handled discreetly to protect the student's dignity, fostering a deeper acceptance of the lesson. Another participant highlighted the importance of privacy:

"We make sure that warnings are almost always one-to-one and private. We want them to feel regret and accountability to God, not humiliation in front of their friends. Public shaming is not adab; it destroys the potential for them to accept the tazkirah."

Evidence from the study also supported this approach in the case where a student who had been demonstrating classroom disrespect was later seen sweeping the mosque under teacher supervision, as a moral reform to instill humility, not as punishment. Teachers actually preferred one-to-one warnings and private meetings to maintaining student dignity in changing behavior. These methods are consistent with classical Islamic beliefs about education, which maintain that teaching should be dignifying to the learner even when discipline is necessary.

Theme 6: School-Initiated Activities: Systematic Character Programming

In both schools, MTDU and MTDH practically integrated *adab* education into daily school routines in the form of structured programs. The example of weekly *usrah* sessions that focused on values like thankfulness, patience, and honesty, usually involving student-led discussion and followed by the teacher's commentary. Another activity is service days, which were conducted at both schools and involved students rotating between tasks such as meal preparation, garden duty, and campus cleaning. One interviewee emphasized how these programs create behavioral habits:

"The usrah is not just a lecture; it is a safe space for them to talk about how hard it is to be patient or honest in real life. The teacher's role is to show them how to apply the Qur'anic concept to their argument with a friend or their family trouble. It connects the book to the body."

The service days, in particular, were used to combat any potential elitism among the students. Another participant noted how mundane chores were spiritualized:

"The hardest part is getting a high-achieving student to clean the communal restroom. But we frame it as an act of humility and service to the community. We tell them that 'Jannah (Paradise) is not built on certificates, but on service and adab,' and the service days are where they practice that."

These tasks were not actually punitive but anticipated curricular activities aimed at fostering humility, cooperation, and appreciation of labor. These moments of activities were utilized by teachers to link tasks to Islamic values. A student, for example, was seen thanked by a teacher for tidying the restrooms, with the added reminder that *"this too is a path to Jannah."* These experiences turned mundane and disliked tasks into character-building practice, reminding students that *adab* has to be practiced daily, not just learned theoretically.

Theme 7: Prioritizing Adab: Institutional Value Hierarchy

One of the institutional values that was observed and reinforced through interviews was giving priority to *adab* as the foundation of all achievement. The leaders all stipulated that, with the right *adab*, Qur'anic memorization or intellectual ability was nonexistent. Well-behaved students were rewarded with leadership opportunities, while poor-mannered students were not represented regardless of grades. One interviewee strongly articulated the rationale behind this policy, linking it directly to Islamic pedagogy:

"We are explicit about this: 'adab before ilm (knowledge).' A student can memorize the whole Qur'an, but if he is arrogant or disrespectful, that knowledge will not benefit him or the community. His character is his first certificate."

The consequence of this institutional value was demonstrated through the allocation of responsibilities, sending a clear message about what was truly valued. Another leader provided a concrete example:

"We have had students with high scores in their academics, but because they lacked humility or were consistently lazy in communal duties, we withdrew their role as class representative or monitor. We use those roles to reward those who model excellent adab, even if they struggle a little more with their studies."

In one case observed, a student who had memorized a number of juz was quietly withdrawn from a monitor position in a class due to continued displays of arrogance. Teachers justified the action in interviews according to Islamic precepts on humility and character as prerequisites for *ilm* (knowledge). Not only did this policy establish expectations, but it reframed measures of success among the school community.

Theme 8: Immersive Environment: The Boarding School Advantage

The home setting itself is turned into a key facilitator for intensive practice of *adab*. Round-the-clock supervision, communal rituals, and thick social interaction enabled leaders to monitor, correct, and mentor pupils on a continuous basis. This setting enhanced their control and made *adab* cultivation possible to be embedded within the whole system of pupils' lives. Leaders recognized the value of this continuous environment as being superior to that of a day school. One interviewee specifically highlighted the utility of communal living:

"In a day school, the child goes home, and our influence ends. Here, when they eat together, when they sleep together, when they clean together, all the time they are forced to practice patience, sharing, and tolerance. We use every single moment to build character."

The constant visibility allowed for immediate, context-specific intervention, turning small, everyday mistakes into spontaneous teaching moments. Another leader noted this strategic advantage:

"The environment means we can catch a tiny mistake even a disrespectful word, a lazy action and correct it immediately. It is much easier to correct a small bad habit before it grows into a big bad character. The 24-hour nature is our biggest tool for continuous reform."

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings illuminate the manner in which leaders in MTDU and MTDH institutionalize a systematic and intentional process of *adab* development through the interaction of behavioral modeling, mentoring, formal reinforcement, and affective leadership. This analysis places these findings in the theoretical context of Islamic pedagogy theory, character education literature, and the socio-religious context of Cambodia's Muslim minority.

Theoretical Implications

Educational leaders' role as moral exemplars substantiates the enduring relevance of Al-Attas' *ta'dib* philosophy, where education and ethical self-cultivation are never distinct (Al-Attas, 1981). The truth that students "learn by seeing" is part of this paradigm and justifies contemporary assertions that character education is most effective through relational modeling (Lickona, 1992). This is consistent with broad moral education literature emphasizing that consistent adult behavioral modeling remains one of the most potent means of ethical transfer (Berkowitz, 2012). Current scholarship, like that of Puspita (2025), supports the fact that the individual leadership patterns of Islamic school leaders significantly impact the academic climate and moral atmosphere of school communities. In boarding schools, the close contact between students and leaders over time enables modeling to take place in both the academic and non-academic sectors, carving its moral impact deeper.

The mentoring function of guidance, as the corrective role of reflective and individualized responses, is a better model for moral upbringing than authoritarian punishment. Ibn Miskawayh's argument in *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq* that moral education is best achieved through reflective commendation, encouragement, and reproof rather than punishment has merit (Ibn Miskawayh, 1968, 2001). Sanusi and Sukari (2025) outline similar mentoring models, which demonstrate that Islamic education encourages good manners and behavior by injecting values into classroom and extracurricular settings (Sanusi & Sukari, 2025). Mentorship practices found in this study, along with giving feedback regarding conduct, facilitate internal connections between students' actions and Islamic values. This facilitates bridging the cognitive and affective elements of character education, which are typically absent in rule-based disciplinary processes.

Relational Dynamics and Moral Development

The findings suggest that relational trust and emotional bonding are essential to ethical influence. The use of family language by students (teachers being referred to as "*yah*" (father) or "*mak*" (mother)) depicts attachment-based pedagogy, which has been shown to give rise to moral responsiveness to teaching (Narvaez, 2006). Fadli and Maswita (2025) demonstrate that close relational relationships enhance moral compliance and identity formation through continuous interaction and religious camaraderie.

Strategic use of praise and appreciation shows awareness of the social nature of moral learning. Public commendation of model behavior consolidates collective norms and makes virtues apparent and attractive. This practice is in tune with Vygotskian social theories of learning, wherein learning, including ethics learning, also occurs through collective interaction and common language (Vygotsky, 1978). Framing praise in religious language and signification amplifies students' understanding of *adab* as a religious obligation rather than a performativity practice.

Implications for Educational Practice

Activity-based programs such as Service Days and *usrah* every week put into practice the cultivation of character through shared practice. The sessions create moral spaces in which humility, cooperation, and service are practiced more than preached. Dewey (1916) posited that education is life and not a preparation for life. Asmariyani et al. (2025) indicate how organized group activities and moral campaigns in Islamic boarding schools maintain common values; hence, *adab* becomes an experienced, communal life.

Finally, prioritizing *adab* above Qur'anic memorization or academic achievement shifts the purpose of education from performance metrics to moral substance. The schools' reluctance to credit students who memorize the Qur'an but fail to practice *adab* reflects a firm stance grounded in the

Prophet's teachings—an articulation of a reclaimed ethical purpose that refuses to separate knowledge from moral development.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

As a qualitative exploratory case study, this research consciously prioritized depth over breadth, seeking to illuminate the intricate how of character cultivation rather than the statistical why across a wider population. While the resulting findings offer a detailed, rich narrative, they are subject to several inherent limitations that shape the interpretation and applicability of the results.

1. Context Specificity: A Unique Story, Not a Universal Rulebook

The study focused specifically on two tahfiz institutions in Cambodia operating within a Muslim minority context. The leadership strategies and success factors, such as the heavy reliance on communal living and the integration of adab as a core institutional priority, are deeply interwoven with this particular cultural, religious, and social landscape. Consequently, the mechanisms identified may not be directly or seamlessly transferable to Islamic schools in other national or cultural settings. The study offers a valuable, in-depth understanding of these two cases, but their story serves as an illustration, not a standardized model for all residential education.

2. The Trade-Off of Focus: Limiting the Voices

In keeping with the nature of a case study, the sample size was small and centered on eight key educational leaders. While these individuals hold the institutional power and knowledge critical to our research, the researchers acknowledged that the student voice, which is the ultimate recipient of these adab-cultivating strategies, is not as prominently featured. The study's findings are shaped primarily by the perceptions and accounts of those doing the guiding; a full picture of the effectiveness and student experience would require subsequent research directly engaging the pupils.

3. The Challenge of Idealized Accounts

During the semi-structured interviews, there was an unavoidable risk of social desirability bias. Educational leaders, understandably, strive to present their institutions and practices in the best possible light, especially when discussing sensitive moral topics. While the research's systematic non-participant observation helped to ground these accounts in reality, the researcher must accept that some of the practices shared represent idealized accounts of what leaders aspire to do, rather than the raw, messy reality of daily boarding school life. The researcher's presence, albeit minimized, also created the possibility of the Hawthorne Effect, subtly altering the subjects' behavior while being observed.

4. The Constraints of Translation

The entire data collection process relied on interviews conducted in the Cham language, followed by rigorous translation into English. Despite the use of bilingual teachers for verification, the core concept under examination, adab, is a profoundly deep and spiritual term rooted in classical Islamic thought. Any transition from one language to another carries the inherent risk of losing subtle cultural or religious nuance. This qualitative challenge means that our English-language analysis, while thorough, may not fully capture the complete depth and emotional resonance of the leaders' original Cham expressions of their moral mission.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the development of *adab* in Islamic boarding schools is a purposefully crafted, relational, and spiritually based process. MTDU and MTDH educational leaders shape students' *adab* not through isolated interventions but by permeating moral education into every institutional level, such as personal example, pedagogical interaction, social relationships, structured activities, and institutional policies. These findings validate the classical Islamic vision of education as holistic character development (*ta'dib*) rather than merely cognitive knowledge acquisition. They show the importance of integration between contemporary character education research, such as relational pedagogy, motivational scaffolding, and experiential learning, all within Islamic pedagogical practice. From the educational leaders' part, their emotional commitment, moral leadership, and pedagogical intentionality in both of these schools provide a model of effective character education that is spiritually grounded and contextually implemented.

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these results, several practical recommendations can be made for Islamic schools, teacher preparation programs, and education policymakers who stress the importance of advancing character development through *adab*-oriented leadership. The first practical recommendation is *institutional policy integration*, where Islamic schools need to institutionalize *adab* as one of the major learning outcomes through comprehensive frameworks that enable students to progress through. The inclusion of leadership roles and awards for moral conduct alongside academic achievement is also integral. Secondly, it is practically recommended to develop an *educator preparation reform*, where teacher preparation programs must include explicit preparation in ethical leadership and moral pedagogy. It is important to equip educators with student-mentorship skills outside of the academic syllabus. Integration of Islamic moral psychology, conflict resolution, and restorative disciplinary practices will help create a good preparation module for the educators.

The next recommendation is that Islamic schools struggling with behavioural or social problems should consider adopting a residential model. Residential or semi-residential boarding models can be implemented wherever feasible, as this immersive approach helps provide consistency and allows for moral habit reinforcement throughout daily routines (Watson, 2020; Fatah Yasin & Jani, 2013). Another practical recommendation is to develop *restorative disciplinary practices* in schools that need to shift from punitive discipline to reflective and restorative practices rooted in Islamic values of mercy and self-development, such as through guided Qur'anic memorization, reflective diaries, and community service. As for future research directions, it is highly recommended that future researchers conduct further research to develop *adab*-based leadership models in various cultural and geopolitical settings, particularly in minority Muslim or post-conflict societies, to inform the global debate on Islamic education and to guide policy formation for ethically grounded educational systems.

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