Research Article

Designing Character Building: Effective Strategies with Rewards and Punishments

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Introduction: Moral degradation remains a major challenge in education, requiring effective strategies for character building. Various approaches, such as religious teachings, curriculum reforms, and arts-based methods, have been implemented, yet their effectiveness varies depending on context and institutional support. This study examines the effectiveness of reward and punishment strategies in shaping student character within an Islamic boarding school setting. **Objectives**: This study aims to evaluate the role of reward and punishment in character development and analyze its integration with national character education policies and Islamic values. **Methods**: A qualitative descriptive research approach was used, employing field research methods such as observations, interviews, and document analysis. The study was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Darussalam, Martapura, South Kalimantan, involving school administrators, teachers, students, and parents. **Results**: Findings indicate that the structured implementation of reward and punishment significantly improves discipline, motivation, and ethical behavior among students. The system is designed through a three-stage process: planning, execution, and evaluation. Additionally, it aligns with national education policies and Islamic teachings, ensuring a holistic and culturally relevant approach. **Conclusions**: The reward and punishment strategy serves as an effective tool for character development, provided it is implemented ethically and fairly. While challenges remain, such as ethical considerations and psychological impacts, the study highlights its potential in fostering moral and academic growth. Further research is needed to refine and optimize this approach in different educational contexts. **Keywords:** Character building, reward and punishment, Islamic education, discipline, moral development.

INTRODUCTION

Moral degradation has been one of the challenges of the current education. Strategies on character building for students has been widely studied by researchers. Effective strategies have been widely implemented to build on characters building for students. Those strategies include guidance and counselling, (Rahmi et al., 2018) education and entertainment, (Ningsih et al., 2021) visual arts, (Salam, 2019) through innovative approaches (Istiqomah, 2023), and reforming new curriculum. (Li-Li, 2012) While these strategies for character development offer comprehensive, effective, and innovative approaches, they may not be widely applicable or sufficient to combat moral degradation on a larger scale. Some of these strategies are contextual and not cultural applicable for some cases, and highly dependent on institutional support. Schools in underprivileged areas with limited resources may struggle to implement these methods effectively. Thus, there needs to be more widely applicable method to design character building.

One of the causes of moral degradation that concerns researchers is the lack of emphasis on religious teachings, which are considered crucial for character building. This led them to explore which approaches are most effective, particularly the role of religious teachings in addressing the issue. Several studies have demonstrated the significant impact of religious teachings on fostering moral development (Biantoro, 2019; Komariah & Nihayah, 2023; Prasetiya et al., 2021) Although these studies offer valuable insights, religious teachings implemented alone are not sufficient to create a strong deterrent effect against moral degradation. Instead, Reward and Punishment strategies have proven to be a great addition to the current strategies, effective in character building. (Fauzi, 2023a; Restiani et al., 2021)

Reward and punishment strategy has been widely implemented in the process of education, particularly in the process of designing character building. This strategy is proven success in improving students' motivation to study, (Sidin, 2021) making students more discipline, (Yuningsih & Sunaryo, 2021) and also shaping students' behaviour to be more positive. (Almafahir & Wahid, 2024) Although the reward and punishment strategies are effective in some cases in character building, there still concerns on the ethical side of this strategy since if it is not implemented correctly, these punitive measures could lead to anxiety, stress, and hinder positive teacher-student relationships. (Maarif & others, 2018; Poudel, 2022) Thus, this study will explore the effective strategies of Reward and Punishment in designing character building.

OBJECTIVES

The objective of this research is to evaluate the effectiveness of reward and punishment strategies in fostering moral development compared to other character-building approaches, such as religious teachings, arts-based methods, and curriculum reforms. Additionally, this study aims to explore the grand design of using reward and punishment as a comprehensive strategy for character building.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design, focusing on the implementation of reward and punishment as a character-building strategy in an Islamic boarding school setting. The study is conducted using field research methods, incorporating observations, interviews, and document analysis to gain a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

The research was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Darussalam, Martapura, Banjar Regency, South Kalimantan, a well-established Islamic boarding school with a structured character-building system. The participants include:

1. Islamic boarding school leaders (administrators and policy-makers)

2. Teachers (Ustadz and Ustadzah) responsible for enforcing discipline

3. Students (Santri) who experience and respond to the reward and punishment system

4. Parents to assess their perspectives on character development

To ensure a thorough understanding of the impact and effectiveness of the reward and punishment system, data were collected through the following methods:

1. Observations: Direct observations of daily activities, classroom interactions, and disciplinary processes within the pesantren environment.

2. Interviews: Semi-structured interviews with school administrators, teachers, and students to explore their perceptions and experiences regarding the character-building system.

3. Document Analysis: Review of institutional documents, school policies, disciplinary records, and reward distribution mechanisms to identify patterns and frameworks.

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RESULTS

The findings indicate that the reward and punishment system implemented at Pondok Pesantren Darussalam is an essential mechanism for character building among students. The design of this system follows a structured approach to reinforcing positive behaviors while correcting undesirable actions.

A. Macro-Level Integration of the Character-Strengthening Framework

The study found that the character-strengthening framework at Darussalam Islamic Boarding School is designed to connect the school's internal systems with national and Islamic values. This approach ensures that the methods used for building character are complete, consistent, and in line with both government policies and religious teachings.

Alignment with National Development Goals

The framework is firmly rooted in Indonesia's National Long-Term Development Plan (RPJPN 2005–2025), which aims to nurture a morally strong and competitive generation. It also reflects the Nawacita agenda—especially Point 8—which stresses the importance of character building and moral education as part of a national mental revolution. The integration of 18 core character values (such as religiosity, honesty, tolerance, discipline, and responsibility) set by the Ministry of Education and Culture further ensures that the school's practices meet national standards. In interviews, several educators noted that embedding these values into daily school routines has been crucial; one staff member observed that "the consistent application of these core values has helped us maintain alignment with national development goals, even when facing local challenges."

Integration of Islamic Values

 The design is also deeply influenced by Islamic teachings, particularly through the principle of amar ma'ruf nahi munkar, which means encouraging good and preventing bad. The system uses Islamic concepts of thawab (reward) and iqab (punishment) to promote not only academic excellence but also moral and spiritual growth. Interview evidence supports this balance: one respondent explained that a "strong mental readiness is required among both rule enforcers and students, as the application of iqab is standard practice—even though challenges exist, we continue to enforce it fairly." This feedback highlights the school's commitment to maintaining a balanced and objective system where both reward and punishment are used to reinforce positive behavior.

Three-Stage Implementation Process

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The implementation of the framework follows a three-stage process: planning, execution, and evaluation.

1. In the planning stage, the school identifies key character values and develops strategies with input from teachers, religious leaders, and policymakers. Interviewees mentioned that this collaborative approach is essential in creating practical and relevant strategies.

2. During the execution stage, daily religious practices, academic activities, and extracurricular programs serve as platforms for applying rewards and punishments. One teacher noted that "the routine application of these measures, despite some obstacles, clearly helps students understand the consequences of their actions."

3. In the evaluation stage, continuous feedback from students, parents, and educators is gathered to review and improve the system. Respondents stressed that regular assessments have allowed the school to refine its approach over time.

Collaboration with National Policies and Community Involvement

The framework also aligns with national policies, such as Presidential Regulation No. 87 of 2017 on Strengthening Character Education, and supports global initiatives like Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education). Moreover, the inclusion of traditional Islamic texts (kitab kuning) in the curriculum reinforces local cultural values

and religious traditions. Educators shared that this external collaboration and community engagement strengthen the framework by ensuring its relevance and effectiveness in a broader socio-cultural context.

Long-Term Vision and Key Outcomes

The long-term vision of this macro-level integration is to produce graduates who are not only academically proficient but also morally and spiritually grounded. The school's mission—rooted in the values of both Pancasila and Islamic teachings—prepares students to face global challenges with integrity and resilience. Interview responses consistently pointed to noticeable improvements in student behavior and academic performance, with staff emphasizing that the system offers "a clear, sustainable model for balanced intellectual, moral, and spiritual development."

B. Micro-Level Implementation of the Reward and Punishment System

The micro-level implementation of the character-strengthening framework at Darussalam Islamic Boarding School focuses on embedding core values into everyday student activities. This approach ensures that ethical and moral lessons are not only taught but are also experienced daily through structured practices. The framework is built around three main components: curriculum integration, a structured reward system, and a graduated punishment system.

Curriculum Integration

At the heart of the micro-level strategy is the integration of values into the school curriculum. Daily activities—such as religious rituals and scheduled academic sessions—serve as conduits for character education. Instruction is largely based on classical Islamic texts (kitab kuning), which provide the moral and ethical foundation for the students. This method ensures that every lesson, whether in the classroom or during extracurricular activities, reinforces the same set of core values. Evidence from the institution's documented practices confirms that such integration helps students internalize moral teachings consistently, as they witness and participate in value-based learning throughout the day.

Structured Reward System

The reward system is designed to recognize both academic and non-academic achievements, reinforcing positive behavior. Students who excel in memorizing Quranic verses, demonstrate leadership, or perform well in various extracurricular activities are acknowledged through a variety of incentives. These include certificates, public praise during assemblies, and material rewards. The systematic nature of this recognition process has been shown to boost students' confidence and motivate them to uphold high standards in their daily conduct. Observations and interviews with staff reveal that when rewards are consistently given for positive behavior, students are more likely to strive for excellence and develop a strong sense of responsibility.

Graduated Punishment System

The punishment component of the framework is implemented on a graduated scale that aligns with sharia principles. Sanctions are tiered based on the severity of the infraction, ensuring that responses to misconduct are both fair and proportionate. For minor violations, verbal warnings are commonly issued; moderate infractions may result in community service or additional study sessions; and severe cases can lead to temporary suspension. This tiered system is carefully designed to correct behavior without causing undue harm or instilling fear. Feedback from interviews with school staff indicates that even though challenges exist in applying punishments consistently, the structured approach allows for a balanced response that is both corrective and educative.

Overall Impact and Evidence

The evidence gathered from direct observations and interviews within the boarding school supports the effectiveness of the micro-level implementation. Educators have noted that integrating values into everyday activities, combined with a clear system of rewards and graduated punishments, has led to improvements in student behavior and academic engagement. Staff members reported that the continuous reinforcement of moral values, through both positive and corrective measures, has helped create a learning environment where students are more aware of their responsibilities and better prepared to face future challenges.

C. Institutional Governance

At Darussalam Islamic Boarding School, the governance of the reward and punishment system is managed through a collaborative effort between two key bodies: the Santri Council (Dewan Kesantrian) and the Muroqib Council (Majelis Muroqib). These councils work jointly to develop, monitor, and adjust disciplinary policies, ensuring that

every decision is made with accountability and ethical integrity. The formulation of these policies is not arbitrary; it is conducted by both the leadership and experienced religious educators, as noted in the document, where it is stated that "rumusan sawab dan iqab dilakukan oleh unsur pimpinan dan ustadz." This joint responsibility reinforces the objectivity of the system and helps to maintain a fair balance between rewards and punishments.

Regular meetings between the Santri Council and the Muroqib Council are an integral part of the governance process. These meetings provide a forum for reviewing disciplinary cases, discussing challenges, and updating guidelines to better address emerging issues. Evidence from the study indicates that such an institutional framework is essential for creating a transparent and consistent disciplinary system. Staff members have observed that the collaborative approach not only ensures that the rules are applied uniformly but also builds trust among students and parents, as the decisions are made collectively and reflect the values of both national education policies and Islamic teachings.

Furthermore, the institutional governance structure plays a critical role in maintaining accountability. The councils are responsible for ensuring that every disciplinary action—whether a reward or a punishment—is justified and proportional to the student's behavior. This mechanism of oversight minimizes errors in judgment and prevents potential abuse of authority, thereby supporting an environment where ethical compliance is rigorously maintained. The study's findings, supported by interviews with school staff, confirm that this dual-council system has been effective in upholding high standards of discipline and moral behavior among the students.

DISCUSSION

At Darussalam Islamic Boarding School, the system of rewards and punishments is managed by two groups: the Santri Council (Dewan Kesantrian) and the Muroqib Council (Majelis Muroqib). These groups work together to create, apply, and monitor discipline rules. Their goal is to be fair and responsible while making sure that students follow ethical values. The rules are based on lessons from school leaders and experienced teachers. They focus on teaching students good behavior, fairness, and respect, all while following Islamic teachings (Fauzi, 2023).

The councils regularly meet to review cases and update discipline policies. They ensure that their rules match both national education policies and Islamic values. For example, school leaders and teachers work together to decide fair rewards (sawab) and punishments (iqab). This teamwork helps keep rules balanced and prevents any unfair use of authority (Fuadah et al., 2023). Making the discipline system clear and fair has been shown to help students follow the rules and build strong morals (Hadiyansyah, 2022). Because of this focus on fairness and honesty, the school's discipline policies also follow national regulations. For example, they support Indonesia's education laws, such as Presidential Regulation No. 87 (2017) on Strengthening Character Education and the National Long-Term Development Plan (RPJPN 2005–2025). These policies aim to help students become responsible, successful, and morally strong individuals (Sa'diyah et al., 2022). By following these national goals, the school makes sure that its discipline system stays respected and meaningful (Habibi & Supriatno, 2020).

School staff have said that having two councils involved in decision-making has helped make rules clearer and more consistent. Teachers believe that including both councils in decisions builds trust among students and parents. Instead of one person making all the choices, decisions are made as a team. This improves the school's discipline system and creates a culture where students understand and follow ethical behavior (Fuad, 2023). Studies also show that using rewards and punishments fairly can help students behave better and succeed in school (Zuhri & Mahbubi, 2023). In the end, the use of rewards and punishments at Darussalam Islamic Boarding School is key to keeping order and helping students grow into responsible individuals. By balancing positive encouragement with fair discipline, the school helps students develop good character, accountability, and a desire to keep improving themselves.

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