

Integrating Thomas Lickona's Character Education Theory with Islamic Moral Values: A Reflective Framework for Student Character Formation in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze Thomas Lickona's theory of character education and its relevance to Islamic moral concepts in shaping the character of reflective students within the Indonesian educational context. The research is motivated by the growing decline in students' morality, low social empathy, and the misuse of digital technology, which call for a more comprehensive approach to character education. The study employs a qualitative descriptive method with a library research design. Data were collected through documentation studies of scholarly works, including books, journals, academic articles, and previous research, on the concepts of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action within the framework of character education. The data were analyzed using content analysis techniques, including reduction, categorization, thematic presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that Lickona's theory offers a holistic model of character education that emphasizes not only cognitive aspects but also affective and behavioral dimensions. The integration of Lickona's framework with Islamic moral principles, such as muhasabah (self-reflection) and tazkiyah al-nafs (self-purification), creates a reflective, contextually relevant approach to character formation aligned with national educational values and Pancasila. This integrative implementation strengthens students' morality, empathy, and social responsibility. The study provides practical implications for educators in designing learning activities that foster moral awareness and ethical habits, as well as opening new research opportunities for applying Lickona's theory in digital and cross-curricular contexts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is oriented not only to the mastery of knowledge and skills but also to shaping students' character and personality (Siagian et al., 2024). In the historical development of societies, education has consistently been a central concern for advancing the lives of each generation in line with the needs and values upheld by the community (Haningsih, 2005). Therefore, in the context of Indonesian national education, this objective is reflected in the formulation of the national education function as stated in Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, namely to develop abilities and shape the character and civilization of a dignified nation (Ristianah, 2020). However, social reality shows that serious challenges exist to this goal. The phenomena of moral degradation, increasing dishonesty, low social empathy, and misuse of digital technology among students are indicators of the weakening of character education in formal educational institutions (Marwan et al., 2025). This condition calls for a more holistic character education paradigm rooted in strong moral values. One influential theory of character education in modern educational discourse is Thomas Lickona's. He emphasizes the importance of character building across three main dimensions: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. According to Lickona, effective character education must integrate moral knowledge, emotional sensitivity, and real moral actions

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(Lickona, 1997). This view offers a comprehensive framework for shaping ethical, socially responsible individuals. However, the theory emerged from a secular Western cultural and philosophical context. Hence, a critical examination of its relevance in the context of Islamic education, which has unique spiritual values and objectives, is necessary.

In Islamic tradition, character education is rooted in the concept of *akhlak*, a personality that reflects harmony among faith, knowledge, and deeds (Sarwadi & Nashihin, 2023). In the study by Ibrahim et al., it was found that character building emphasizes not only rational and emotional aspects but also spiritual dimensions oriented toward the purification of the soul (*tazkiyah al-nafs*) and self-reflection (*muhāsabah*) (Ibrahim et al., 2025). Therefore, integrating Lickona's character education theory with Islamic moral concepts is important to develop a character education model that is reflective, contextual, and aligned with Islamic values and national education goals.

A substantial body of Indonesian scholarship has engaged Thomas Lickona's character education theory as a key reference point, often by adopting his tripartite account of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action as the basic structure for discussing character formation in schools and early childhood education (Hafizallah, 2020). At the same time, a growing number of studies revisit the classical Islamic *akhlāq* tradition, particularly through the thought of figures such as al-Ghazali and Ibn 'Arabi, and concentrate on explicating moral concepts like *akhlāq*, *tazkiyat al-nafs*, and the role of the teacher as a moral exemplar, usually within a largely intra-traditional framework (Hidayati et al., 2025; Sanuhung et al., 2021). Yet these two strands of literature are still mostly pursued in parallel: Lickona's model is frequently employed with limited theological or spiritual interrogation, while classical *akhlāq* studies seldom engage systematically with contemporary character education theories. As a result, there remains a noticeable lack of integrative work that critically relates Lickona's framework to Islamic notions of *akhlāq*, *tazkiyah al-nafs*, and *muhāsabah*, and that develops this synthesis into a reflective model of character formation aligned with the aims of the Pancasila Student Profile in the digital era. The present article seeks to fill this gap by proposing a coherent, reflective framework that integrates Lickona's psychological insights into a constructive dialogue with the normative and spiritual resources of Islamic moral thought.

Theoretical Framework

The development of reflective character among students in the Indonesian educational context is a multidimensional construct that requires an integrative theoretical approach. This research departs from a critical dialogue between two major paradigms: contemporary character education theory as developed by Thomas Lickona and the concept of moral education (*akhlāq*) within the Islamic tradition. Lickona defines character education as the deliberate effort to cultivate virtues that are objectively good for the individual and society, realized through three integral pillars: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action (Lickona, 1992). This theory offers a holistic framework, acknowledging that moral knowledge alone is insufficient without being accompanied by emotional appreciation (moral feeling) and actual behavioral implementation (moral action). In the context of modern education, Lickona's model has been widely adapted to foster ethical reasoning and social responsibility in students (M. W. Berkowitz, 2011).

Specifically, the moral knowledge dimension includes the cognitive ability to understand ethical values, identify moral dilemmas, and use reasoning in decision-making. In the book *Moral Development and Reality: Beyond the Theories of Kohlberg, Hoffman, and Haidt*, Gibbs argues that moral feelings focus on the development of the affective domain, such as empathy, conscience, and an intrinsic motivation to do good (Gibbs, 2013). Meanwhile, moral action is the crystallization of the previous two dimensions into consistent and integrity-driven behavior. Research by Narvaez & Lapsley reinforces that the effectiveness of character education depends heavily on integrating these three domains into daily learning experiences rather than on mere doctrinal teaching (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2008). While Lickona's model is comprehensive, it originated from a secular Western socio-philosophical context (Elyunusi et al., 2022). Therefore, its application in societies with strong religious values, like Indonesia, requires critical reinterpretation and adaptation.

Akhlāq-Based Character Formation in the Islamic Educational Tradition

Parallel to Lickona's theory, the Islamic educational tradition has a robust foundation in the concept of *akhlāq* (morals/character), understood as the manifestation of integrated faith (*iman*), knowledge (*'ilm*), and deeds (*'amal*). (Sunardi et al., 2025) The objective of moral instruction within Islam extends beyond simply molding commendable external actions (*al-akhlāq al-zahiriyyah*); it fundamentally aims for something more profound: purifying the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) from blameworthy traits (*al-akhlāq al-madhūmah*) and adorning it with praiseworthy traits (*al-akhlāq al-mahmūdah*). The core process in this purification is *muhāsabah* or critical self-reflection, a practice of introspection to continually evaluate one's intentions, words, and deeds before God. This concept adds a profound spiritual and transcendental aspect.

dimension to character formation, where virtue holds not only social value but is also a form of worship ('ubudiyah).

Integrative Framework for Reflective Character Education

Recent research has begun to explore the meeting points between Western character education and Islamic education. For instance, a study by Hadi et al. proposes that the Islamic concept of *adab*, encompassing courtesy, intellectual discipline, and social piety, can serve as a philosophical framework that enriches the goals of contemporary character education (Hadi et al., 2021). Similarly, Hasyim analyzes how al-Ghazali's principles of *tazkiyat al-nafs* can be operationalized in modern school settings to develop students' emotional regulation and moral resilience (Hasyim, 2022). However, most of these studies remain conceptual explorations or separate analyses. The research gap identified is the lack of systematic efforts to conduct a deep and operational theoretical integration between Lickona's tripartite framework (knowing-feeling-action) and the mechanisms of character formation in Islam (*akhlaq-tazkiyah-muhasabah*), particularly within the Indonesian context, to realize the Pancasila Student Profile.

In the Indonesian context, character education must also be responsive to the challenges of the digital era, where moral degradation and low social empathy are often linked to the misuse of technology. Sari et al. indicate that strengthening reflective character can serve as a fortress for students in responding to information and interactions in digital spaces, by developing critical thinking and digital empathy skills (Sari et al., 2024). Reflective character, in this regard, is operationally defined as the student's capacity to cognitively analyze the values and moral consequences of an action or information.

Therefore, this research will employ an Integrative Conceptual Framework that synthesizes Lickona's three pillars with the foundations of Islamic *akhlāq*. This synthesis is realized by mapping: (1) Moral Knowing with the process of acquiring 'ilm al-*akhlaq* (knowledge of morals) and engaging in *tafakkur* (contemplation) upon it; (2) Moral Feeling with the process of *tazkiyat al-nafs* to purify the heart (*qalb*) from moral diseases and cultivate love for goodness (*maḥabbah al-khayr*), and (3) Moral Action with the habituation (*al-'adah*) of righteous deeds preceded and followed by *muḥāsabah*. This framework aims to produce a character formation approach that is not only comprehensive in psychological-pedagogical terms but also imbued with spiritual and contextual nuances, making it relevant to developing the Pancasila Student Profile, characterized by noble character, independence, and critical reasoning.

2. METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design using a library research approach. This approach was selected because the study focuses on a conceptual and theoretical examination of Thomas Lickona's character education framework and its relevance to the formation of reflective, morally grounded students within the Indonesian educational context. A qualitative design enables an in-depth understanding of educational concepts through the interpretation of textual and theoretical data rather than numerical measurement (Lickona, 1992).

Data were collected through documentary analysis, including a systematic review of scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and prior research on character education, moral development, and reflective morality. The data collection process comprised several stages: (1) identification and selection of relevant sources, (2) critical reading and extraction of key concepts, and (3) thematic categorization of findings. Source selection was guided by three criteria: (a) direct relevance to Thomas Lickona's theory of character education, (b) academic credibility, as indicated by publication in reputable journals or authoritative academic works, and (c) substantive contribution to the understanding of reflective and moral character formation (Sugiyono, 2020).

The collected data were analyzed using content analysis. This method was applied to identify recurring patterns, themes, and meanings embedded in scholarly texts. Content analysis allows for the generation of replicable and valid inferences by systematically considering the contextual dimensions of textual data (Krippendorff, 1985). The analytical procedure followed three main stages: (1) data reduction, focusing on key concepts such as moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action; (2) data display, in which the relationships among concepts were organized to illustrate their relevance to reflective character formation; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification, involving interpretative synthesis of the findings.

To ensure the study's trustworthiness, source triangulation was employed by comparing and corroborating insights from multiple theoretical perspectives, including the moral education theories of Lawrence Kohlberg, John Dewey, Al-Ghazali, and Ki Hadjar Dewantara. This strategy was used to minimize interpretive bias and enhance the analytical rigor of the findings (Moleong, 2014). In addition, a hermeneutic approach was applied during interpretation to capture the philosophical and pedagogical meanings underlying Lickona's ideas within their broader educational context (Palmer, 1969).

Overall, this methodological framework was designed to systematically explore and critically interpret Thomas Lickona's contributions to character education, particularly in relation to reflective and moral character development. Through a qualitative descriptive, library-based approach, the study seeks to make a robust conceptual contribution to the discourse on character education in Indonesia, particularly by integrating moral and spiritual values into contextual, sustainable educational practices.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The results of this study show that Thomas Lickona's character education theory offers a holistic model for student character formation through three main dimensions: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. Moral knowing emphasizes students' understanding of moral values and ethical decision-making. Moral feeling refers to the development of conscience, empathy, self-control, and love for goodness. Moral action represents the actual practice of moral values through responsible behavior and moral habits. The study also reveals that Lickona's theory can be integrated with Islamic moral values. Moral knowing is connected with *ilm al-akhlaq* and *tafakkur*, moral feeling is related to *tazkiyah al-nafs*, while moral action is strengthened through righteous habituation and *muhāsabah*. This integration forms a reflective character education framework that combines cognitive, affective, behavioral, and spiritual dimensions.

These findings indicate that reflective character education is relevant for Indonesian students, particularly in addressing moral decline, weak social empathy, and the misuse of digital technology. The integration of Lickona's framework with Islamic moral values fosters students who are morally conscious, spiritually grounded, socially responsible, and aligned with the values of the Pancasila Student Profile.

Discussion

1. The Essence of Thomas Lickona's Character Education Theory

Thomas Lickona is widely recognized as one of the leading pioneers of the character education movement in the United States, which emerged in response to the moral crisis among younger generations in the late twentieth century. He argued that modern education has tended to overemphasize cognitive outcomes and academic achievement while neglecting the moral and spiritual dimensions of human development. For Lickona, technological and economic progress becomes meaningless if individuals lose their moral compass and social ethical orientation. Accordingly, he proposed an educational approach that places character formation at the core of educational aims (Lickona, 1992).

For Lickona, character education is not an auxiliary component of formal schooling; rather, it constitutes the very heart of the educational process. He asserts that "character education is the deliberate effort to cultivate virtue that is objectively good for the individual and society" (Munawarsyah et al., 2024). In this sense, character formation is inseparable from moral formation, because authentic character embodies morality in lived practice (*moral life lived*) (Phelps & Brown, 2023). Theoretically, Lickona developed his character education framework on the foundations of moral developmental psychology, previously advanced by scholars such as Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg (Fadli, 2023). However, unlike Kohlberg, who primarily emphasized moral reasoning, Lickona broadened the framework by integrating two additional domains: moral feeling and moral action. This expansion resulted in a holistic conception of character education known as Lickona's moral triangle (*moral knowing, moral feeling, moral action*), which has become a central reference in character education initiatives across diverse contexts (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2008).

Furthermore, in line with Asnawan's research, Lickona rejects indoctrinative approaches to morality, arguing that moral values cannot be imposed but must be internalized through reflective, repeated moral experiences (Asnawan, 2020). In this respect, teachers, families, and the wider social environment play a decisive role. Teachers are not merely transmitters of knowledge; they also function as moral models who consistently enact virtues in daily conduct. Through moral exemplification and ethical dialogue, students learn to understand, feel, and practice moral values in real-life settings (M. Berkowitz & Bier, 2007). In Lickona's view, the essence of character education extends beyond the individual to include a social dimension. Good character is not adequately expressed only through personal virtues such as honesty and discipline; it must also be reflected in the capacity to live with others in justice and compassion. Hence, the ultimate goal of character education is the development of citizenship virtues—virtues that enable individuals to contribute constructively to social, civic, and national life (Lickona, 1997).

In the school context, Lickona's theory advocates the creation of a moral community, an educational environment that honors values, cultivates empathy, and reinforces social responsibility among its students.

Members (Arif et al., 2023). Schools function not only as sites of knowledge transmission but also as moral laboratories where virtues such as honesty, cooperation, and respect are practiced in concrete ways (M. W. Berkowitz, 2011). A growing body of research suggests that consistent implementation of Lickona's character education principles positively influences students' moral behavior in both general and faith-based educational settings. For example, instructional programs that integrate moral values into subject content have been associated with improvements in social empathy, responsibility, and ethical sensitivity (Saparahayuningsih, 2019).

Moreover, Lickona's theory contains an implicit spiritual dimension, insofar as good character is often linked to transcendental orientations, namely, alignment with universal truths and belief in God (Susanti, 2022). This indicates that Lickona's framework resonates with moral educational traditions across religions and cultures, including Indonesian value traditions that emphasize balance among intellect, morality, and spirituality. Overall, the essence of Thomas Lickona's character education theory can be understood as a comprehensive approach to developing the whole person—one who thinks rightly, values goodness affectively, and acts in accordance with moral principles. Research by Hart et al. shows that character education is not a short-term project but a sustained process of cultivating virtue through exemplification, reflection, and habituation in everyday life (Hart et al., 2020).

1.1 The Dimensions of Moral Knowing, Moral Feeling, and Moral Action

Lickona conceptualized character education through what is commonly referred to as the moral triangle, comprising three fundamental dimensions: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action (Lickona, 1992, 1997). These dimensions form an integrated conceptual framework for student character formation. Lickona emphasized that authentic character education can only succeed when these domains complement one another and interact dynamically within the individual (Lickona, 1992).

a. Moral Knowing

Moral knowing constitutes the cognitive foundation of the character education process. At this stage, students learn to understand moral values, distinguish right from wrong, and recognize the ethical consequences of actions (Izzati et al., 2019). According to Lickona, moral knowing includes six main components: moral awareness, understanding moral values, the ability to see from others' perspectives, moral reasoning, decision-making, and self-understanding (Asnawan, 2020).

Through educational processes, students are guided to comprehend the moral rationale underlying rules and social norms. This knowledge is not limited to memorizing values; rather, it develops critical and reflective reasoning about the moral dilemmas encountered in daily life. While this domain intersects with Kohlberg's theory of moral development, which emphasizes justice-based moral reasoning, Lickona argued that moral knowledge must be accompanied by emotional engagement and behavioral habituation to become functionally meaningful (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2008).

Recent studies indicate that strong moral understanding is positively associated with ethical decision-making and socially responsible behavior in school contexts (Elyunusi et al., 2022). Accordingly, moral knowing serves as the cognitive basis for character development, preparing individuals to grasp the meaning of moral values before internalizing them through action.

b. Moral Feeling

Whereas moral knowing emphasizes cognition, moral feeling focuses on the affective and emotional dimensions of character formation. Lickona argued that without moral feeling, knowledge of goodness is insufficient to motivate moral conduct (Lickona, 1997). Therefore, character education should cultivate conscience and a love for the good. Moral feeling includes several components: conscience, self-esteem, empathy, loving the good, self-control, and humility (M. Berkowitz & Bier, 2007). Through moral feeling, students not only know what is good but also experience an inner moral calling to enact it.

Lickona associated moral feeling with emotional and spiritual education, underscoring the teacher's role in fostering empathy and modeling moral behavior (Asnawan, 2020). Teachers are expected to foster classroom environments that support positive emotional expression and respect for others' feelings. When students feel emotionally safe, they are more likely to internalize moral values and develop healthy social relationships (M. Berkowitz & Bier, 2007).

Empirical evidence from Narvaez's research shows that strengthening moral feelings can increase prosocial behavior, reduce violence, and strengthen solidarity among students (Narvaez, 2010). Thus, moral feeling operates as an emotional bridge between moral knowledge and moral action, as individuals are more likely to act morally when the value of goodness itself engages their affective domain.

c. Moral Action

The third dimension, moral action, represents the culmination of the character education process. Moral action refers to the concrete enactment of moral values and feelings that have been internalized.

Lickona stressed that moral behavior does not emerge spontaneously; it results from sustained habituation and continuous self-reflection (Derryberry & Thoma, 2005). He proposed that moral action comprises three core elements: moral competence, moral will, and moral habit (Lickona, 1992).

Moral competence involves the capacity to apply moral principles in real situations; moral will refers to the internal motivation to do what is right; and moral habit refers to repeated actions reflecting integrity and value-consistency (Arvanitis & Kalliris, 2020). These components highlight that moral action is closely linked to self-awareness and human agency. Moral education that merely teaches values without providing opportunities for authentic practice risks producing weak character that is ineffective in responding to everyday moral dilemmas (M. W. Berkowitz, 2011).

In educational settings, moral action can be developed through experiential learning, service learning, and systematic school-based value habituation programs (Schutte & Wetmore, 2012). Through such activities, students are not only exposed to moral concepts and emotions but also practice them within real social contexts.

d. Integrating the Three Moral Dimensions

Lickona argued that character education is only effective when moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action are integrated. Separating these domains produces an imbalanced moral education (Hafizallah, 2020). Individuals who know goodness without feeling it may become morally dry and overly rationalistic, while those who feel goodness without acting may remain trapped in passive morality. Therefore, these dimensions must be unified within holistic learning systems.

This integration can be implemented through reflective pedagogy that combines value instruction (knowing), emotional engagement (feeling), and moral practice (action) within coherent learning activities. For example, in teaching honesty, the teacher should not only explain its moral significance (knowing), but also cultivate empathy for victims of dishonesty (feeling), and provide opportunities to practice honesty in concrete situations, such as examinations without cheating (action). In this way, learning becomes a complete moral experience (Prabowo, 2024).

Recent findings also support the effectiveness of integrative models. Character education programs that combine Lickona's three dimensions have been shown to improve moral awareness, positive social behavior, and students' reflective capacity when facing ethical dilemmas (Elyunusi et al., 2022). Additionally, such integration contributes to a supportive school climate that sustains value habituation within the educational environment. Consequently, the integration of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action constitutes the core of reflective character education, affirming that character is not merely an outcome of moral instruction but the product of lived experiences uniting cognition, emotion, and action within ethical consciousness. Education that integrates these dimensions can nurture individuals who are not only intelligent and competent but also morally grounded, empathetic, and of noble character.

1.2 Definition and Philosophical Foundations of Reflective Character

Reflective character refers to students' capacity to think critically and introspectively about the moral values they hold and the actions they perform in everyday life. Moral reflection requires a high level of self-awareness regarding the underlying reasons for an action and the moral consequences it generates (Elyunusi et al., 2022). In character education, reflection is not merely "re-thinking," but a deep moral evaluation of behavior and internal motivation.

Lickona highlighted that morally grounded character formation should be based on conscientious reflection, a conscience-based reflection on universal goodness (Lickona, 1992). Through reflection, students are encouraged to understand moral values not only through rational analysis but also through personal and social experience. In this respect, reflective character becomes a bridge between moral knowing and moral action, ensuring that good conduct emerges from moral awareness rather than from unconscious habit (Lickona, 1992).

From the philosophy of education perspective, reflective character aligns with a humanistic view that positions humans as thinking and moral agents responsible for themselves (Tamrat, 2020). Education functions not only to transfer knowledge but also to form value-conscious persons. Reflection serves as a means to cultivate profound moral awareness—awareness of relationships among the self, others, and God (Larmore, 2010). Hence, reflective education integrates intellectual, spiritual, and social dimensions into a coherent whole.

1.3 Reflective Character in Learning Processes

Learning processes that foster reflective character require dialogical and participatory educational practices. Alam, drawing on Paulo Freire's "*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, criticises the banking model, rejected the banking model of education that positions students as passive recipients (Alam, 2013). Instead, he proposed problem-posing education, which invites students to engage in dialogue, ask questions, and reflect on their experiences. This approach is consistent with Lickona's emphasis on reflection as a mechanism for value internalization. In Indonesian education, reflective character can be developed through value-based learning, project-based learning, and contextual learning that connects values with real-life experiences (Komalasari, 2012). Teachers may facilitate reflective sessions at the end of lessons by encouraging students to write reflective journals or discuss moral dilemmas they face at school and at home. Students trained through reflective activities have been reported to show meaningful improvements in self-awareness, academic honesty, and social responsibility (Coelho et al., 2017).

Reflective character can also be strengthened through metacognitive and teacher-student dialogue, which enables students to become aware of the thinking and emotional processes underlying moral decisions. This approach fosters meta-ethical awareness, namely the ability to assess the moral quality of one's life choices. When students can link personal experiences to universal moral principles, values such as justice, honesty, and empathy cease to be abstract and become embedded within their identity (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2008).

1.4 The Relationship between Reflective Character and Akhlāq

In Islamic thought, reflection (*muhāsabah*) constitutes a core mechanism in *akhlāq* formation. Al-Ghazali, in *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, emphasized that noble character can only be attained through continuous introspection, recognizing errors, correcting them, and strengthening the intention to do good. In this sense, reflection is not merely intellectual, but also spiritual (Temlett, 2024).

Lickona and Western moral theorists such as Kohlberg and Rest share conceptual convergence with Islamic tradition in viewing character as a synthesis of reason and the heart (Prasetiya, 2020). In contemporary character education, *akhlāq* is understood as deeply internalized morality rather than simple compliance with external norms. Therefore, reflective character can function as a bridge between secular moral education and faith-based *akhlāq* education, as both highlight self-awareness as central to moral agency (Larry Nucci, Darcia Narvaez, 2014; Lickona, 1992). Practically, reflective *akhlāq* education requires teachers not only to teach values but also to serve as moral exemplars and spiritual mentors. Teachers function as *murabbi* character builders who touch students' hearts through consistent role modeling and compassionate guidance. Research by Amirullah et al. indicates that teachers who integrate reflective approaches into *akhlāq* education can enhance students' moral maturity and strengthen spiritual values in daily behavior (Amirullah et al., 2022).

From a civilizational perspective, Islamic concepts of *akhlāq*, *tazkiyah al-nafs*, and *muhāsabah* have historically functioned not only as personal disciplines but also as social mechanisms for shaping communities grounded in justice, compassion, and mutual responsibility. Mulyadi's study on the integration of character education and *tazkiyah al-nafs* in the thought of Abu Ḥasan al-Nadwi, for instance, demonstrates how spiritual practices such as prayer, fasting, *dhikr*, and almsgiving are intended to produce individuals whose purified hearts can sustain a moral social order and a clear vision of national character (Mulyadi, 2021).

Similarly, recent work on *muhāsabah* in al-Ghazali's educational thought shows that reflective self-examination strengthens ethical and spiritual awareness, cultivates humility (*tawaḍu*), and deepens respect for teachers, knowledge, and fellow students, virtues that are essential for building morally cohesive learning communities (Mukharomah, 2025). When Lickona's emphasis on moral reflection is brought into conversation with these Islamic practices, reflective character is no longer understood merely as an intrapsychic process of evaluating one's choices, but as a spiritually informed discipline that connects individual self-scrutiny to the wider project of cultivating a virtuous *ummah*. Practices of *tazkiyah* and *muhāsabah* thus provide the civilizational depth that enables Lickona's tripartite model to be reoriented toward the Qur'anic vision of a community that enjoins what is right and forbids what is wrong.

1.5 The Role of Reflection in Developing Noble Character

Reflection plays a critical role in cultivating deep moral awareness. Through reflection, students are guided to contemplate the meaning underlying their actions, evaluate their alignment with the values of goodness, and pursue continuous self-improvement (Jacoby, 2024). In contemporary education, reflective practices can be institutionalized through moral journaling, peer discussion, and service-learning reflection. Such processes foster ethical thinking habits and support the development of a strong moral

identity (M. W. Berkowitz, 2011). Reflection also strengthens the integration of reason and the heart, fostering spiritual awareness that moral actions are not only socially consequential but also constitute worship. This

Perspective resonates with the Islamic principle of *adab*, which holds that knowledge should lead individuals toward goodness and submission to divine truth (Hadi et al., 2021).

Moreover, reflection supports the development of moral resilience, the capacity to maintain integrity under social pressure and within complex ethical environments. Jensen emphasized that reflection practices tend to be more steadfast in upholding values even in permissive contexts (Jensen, 2015). Jensen emphasized that reflection integrated into educational curricula contributes to the development of moral steadfastness, higher empathy, and mature ethical decision-making.

1.6 Critical Reflections on Lickona from an Islamic Perspective

Several Muslim scholars have begun to question the theological limitations of Lickona's otherwise influential character education framework. From an Islamic psychology perspective, Hafizallah argues that Lickona's tripartite model of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action, while pedagogically powerful, remains largely confined to cognitive–affective–behavioural dimensions and does not fully account for the transcendental orientation that is central to Islamic moral formation (Hafizallah, 2020).

Likewise, Rijal, Kosasih, and Nurdin show that Western character education tends to ground value formation primarily in human reason. In contrast, Islamic approaches insist on divine revelation as a fundamental moral source, as reflected in Yusuf Qaradawi's emphasis on *rabbaniyyah*, *syumul*, and *wasatiyyah* as defining features of Islamic morality (Rijal et al., 2023). These critiques highlight the need to complement Lickona's psychological insights with concepts such as *niyyah* (intention), *tawhīd* (God-conscious unity), and eschatological accountability, which anchor moral agency within a broader spiritual and metaphysical horizon.

Building on these debates, this article contends that Lickona's framework cannot simply be "*imported*" into Islamic settings without critical examination. While his emphasis on habituating good actions is compatible with Islamic concerns for practice (*amal*), the absence of explicit reference to *niyyah*, the centrality of *'ubudiyah* (servanthood to God), and the hereafter means that his theory must be reinterpreted through the lens of Islamic moral theology. By integrating *akhlāq*, *tazkiyah al-nafs*, and *muḥasabah* into the analysis, the proposed reflective framework seeks to address this lacuna and situate character education within a distinctly theocentric moral vision.

1.7 Educational Implications of Reflective and Morally Grounded Character Education

Reflective and morally grounded character education has broad implications for educational policy and practice (Guidry, 2008). First, curricula should be designed not only to achieve academic competencies but also to cultivate moral awareness and ethical reasoning. Each subject can function as a vehicle for character development when complemented by reflective learning activities. These insights have broader implications for how Islamic education is conceived as a civilizational project. Historical studies of early Islam consistently show that education functioned as a central pillar in transforming pre-Islamic tribal society into a morally disciplined and socially cohesive civilization, with the Prophet's pedagogical practices forming the nucleus of this transformation (Alimni et al., 2025). Contemporary research likewise emphasizes that Islamic education aims not only to produce pious individuals but also to nurture citizens who embody justice, compassion, and responsibility, thereby contributing to the moral fabric of society (Hapid & Al-Fathoni, 2025).

In this light, a reflective character model that integrates Lickona's psychological structure with *akhlāq*, *tazkiyah al-nafs*, and *muḥasabah* should be understood as part of a broader nation-building and ummah-building agenda rather than merely as a strategy for producing "well-behaved students." In the Indonesian context, this civilizational orientation resonates strongly with the Pancasila Student Profile, which aims to form learners who are not only competent and independent but also faithful to God, noble in character, and committed to social justice. By embedding reflective practices rooted in Islamic moral theology within school culture through rituals of *muḥasabah*, community-oriented projects, and curricula that connect digital citizenship with spiritual accountability, character education can become a key instrument for shaping a just, peaceful, and dignified ummah at both national and global levels.

Second, teachers should be trained as moral facilitators capable of guiding student reflection through dialogical and empathic approaches. Third, schools should embody reflective culture through educative discipline practices rather than punitive approaches. Behavioral violations should be treated as opportunities for moral reflection rather than as grounds for administrative punishment, enabling schools to function as moral communities that support sustained character formation (Guidry, 2008). Fourth, reflective education should also be strengthened in family contexts through parental involvement in moral

dialogue with children. Consistency between school and home education remains a key factor for the successful internalization of moral values. In sum, reflective and morally grounded character is not a short-term

learning outcome but a continuous developmental process integrating cognition, emotion, and action. Education that cultivates moral reflection can nurture a generation that is not only knowledgeable but also noble-minded, responsible, and strongly committed to humanitarian and spiritual values.

2. Implementing Lickona's Theory in Developing Reflective and Morally Grounded Character

2.1 Implementation Approaches within Educational Contexts

Implementing Lickona's theory to develop reflective, morally grounded character requires an integrated educational system that aligns curriculum, school culture, and teacher modeling. Lickona argued that effective character education must instill moral values through the three pillars of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. Lickona. These pillars can only develop within school environments that consistently enact virtues in concrete ways (Lickona, 1992).

In the Indonesian context, Lickona's theory aligns with national educational values grounded in Pancasila and the Pancasila Student Profile agenda. Education is meant to do more than build intellectual abilities; it should also shape people into individuals with strong, admirable character. Therefore, Lickona's framework can serve as both a philosophical and practical foundation for cultivating reflective character in students who think critically, empathize, and act in accordance with their moral conscience (Lickona, 1992).

This implementation can be operationalized through integrating character values across subject areas. For instance, language learning can include moral reflection writing based on narratives; mathematics lessons can incorporate discussions of honesty and justice in problem-solving. Such an approach reflects integrated character education, wherein each subject simultaneously develops intellectual and moral capacities.

2.2 Teachers as Moral Models and Facilitators of Reflection

Within Lickona's theory, teachers play a strategic role as moral models and facilitators of character formation. Teachers are not only conveyors of content knowledge; they also embody values through daily behavior (Lickona, 1997). Teacher exemplification is a powerful mechanism for shaping students' moral awareness, as they learn not only from instruction but also from lived examples.

Teachers also facilitate moral reflection by guiding students to critically consider the ethical significance of their actions (Dinkelman, 1999). In practice, teachers may employ ethical dialogue, reflective journals, and value-based discussions to help students recognize the moral dimensions of everyday life. Students who regularly participate in reflective learning activities often demonstrate improvements in honesty, responsibility, and social empathy.

In addition, teachers should cultivate empathic communication with students. Positive emotional relationships build trust, which in turn creates a safe space for students to reflect on mistakes and engage in moral growth without fear (Meyers et al., 2019). Thus, teachers function not only as formal educators but also as moral and emotional guides, inspiring character development.

Furthermore, the teacher's role as a facilitator of reflection becomes increasingly important in contemporary education, where students face complex moral challenges in both physical and digital environments. Issues such as academic dishonesty, cyberbullying, intolerance, and irresponsible use of technology require teachers to move beyond conventional instruction and create learning spaces that encourage ethical awareness. Through reflective questioning, case-based discussions, and analysis of moral dilemmas, teachers can help students connect moral concepts to real-life situations. In this process, students are trained not only to identify what is right or wrong, but also to examine the intentions, consequences, and responsibilities behind their actions.

From an Islamic educational perspective, the teacher's role is closely related to that of a murabbi, an educator who nurtures students intellectually, morally, and spiritually. Teachers are expected to guide students toward noble character by combining knowledge, example, advice, and compassionate supervision. This role aligns with the concept of *muhāsabah*, which encourages students to evaluate their behavior and continuously improve. Therefore, integrating Lickona's character education theory with Islamic moral values positions teachers as central agents in developing reflective, morally grounded students who are not only academically competent but also ethically responsible and spiritually aware.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This article has offered a novel integrative framework that brings Thomas Lickona's character education theory into systematic dialogue with Islamic moral concepts, with the specific aim of fostering reflective character among Indonesian Muslim students. By mapping Lickona's domains of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action onto the Islamic notions of 'ilm, qalb, akhlāq, tazkiyah al-nafs, and muḥasabah, the study has shown that character education can be both psychologically robust and spiritually grounded. In doing so, it moves beyond approaches that either adopt Lickona in a value-neutral manner or treat akhlāq as merely a set of prescribed virtues. Instead, it proposes a reflective model that integrates cognitive, affective, behavioral, and spiritual dimensions of moral formation.

This study concludes that integrating Thomas Lickona's character education theory with Islamic moral concepts offers a coherent, contextually grounded framework for developing students' character in Indonesia, particularly amid concerns about moral decline, weakening social empathy, and the misuse of digital technology. The findings emphasize that Lickona's model is holistic because it addresses not only cognitive development but also affective and behavioral dimensions through the moral triangle of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. By aligning this tripartite structure with Islamic moral aims, the study reinforces the possibility of character education that is simultaneously pedagogically systematic and spiritually meaningful.

More specifically, the study synthesizes Lickona's pillars with Islamic mechanisms of akhlāq formation by mapping moral knowing to the acquisition of moral knowledge and to tafakkur (moral reflection), moral feeling to tazkiyat al-nafs (inner purification), and moral action to the habituation of righteous deeds strengthened by muḥasabah (critical self-reflection). This synthesis positions reflective character as a central outcome: students are expected to evaluate intentions, consider moral consequences, and enact values consciously rather than mechanically. In this regard, reflective character functions as a conceptual bridge between secular moral education and faith-based akhlāq education, because both traditions converge on self-awareness as a prerequisite for moral agency and ethical consistency.

In practice, the study underscores that reflective, morally grounded character education requires systemic alignment among curriculum, school culture, and teacher exemplification rather than isolated moral lessons. Teachers are positioned not only as instructors but also as moral models and facilitators of reflection through ethical dialogue, reflective journaling, and value-based discussions that connect classroom learning with real-life dilemmas. At the institutional level, schools are encouraged to cultivate a reflective culture through educative (not punitive) discipline and to strengthen continuity between school and home via parental engagement in moral dialogue, ensuring sustained internalization of values.

Finally, given that this work is a qualitative, library-based conceptual study, its conclusions should be supported by empirical validation across diverse school contexts, including interventions that examine how reflective practices shape students' moral awareness, empathy, and conduct over time. Future research is particularly warranted in digital and cross-curricular settings, where reflective character may serve as a protective capacity for ethical decision-making in online interactions and information processing. Accordingly, subsequent studies may develop operational indicators and assessment rubrics for reflective character that remain faithful to both Lickona's moral domains and Islamic akhlāq formation, while also aligning with national character objectives.

At a practical level, the reflective framework developed in this article invites policy-makers, school leaders, and teachers in Indonesia to design learning environments that systematically cultivate reflective practices alongside cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of character. Classroom activities, school rituals, and assessment strategies can be reoriented to integrate muḥasabah, critical dialogue, and spiritually informed reflection on the digital and social realities students face. Nevertheless, this study remains primarily conceptual and library-based, and its framework has not yet been empirically tested in specific school settings. Future research should therefore operationalize the proposed reflective character model in concrete educational interventions, explore its impact on students' moral agency in the digital era, and compare its relevance across different Muslim-majority contexts. Such empirical work will be essential to refine further and validate the theoretical contribution offered here.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that this manuscript was prepared without any conflict of interest whatsoever. The entire research, analysis, and writing process was conducted independently, without any influence from third parties that could affect objectivity or scientific integrity. There are no financial, institutional, or personal relationships that could bias the content and conclusions of this manuscript. All sources and references have been used transparently and in accordance with applicable academic principles.

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