
Moral Cognition and Emotional Regulation in Islamic Religious Education at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah by Phenomenological Approach

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ABSTRACT

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Objectives: This research aims to explore the construction of moral cognition and emotional regulation in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (Islamic Primary School) students during Islamic Religious Education (IRE), with a focus on their lived experiences in daily classroom interactions.

Method: A qualitative descriptive phenomenological approach was employed. Students aged 8–11 years and Islamic Religious Education teachers from Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Jogonalan in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, were selected as research participants. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Analysis followed Colaizzi's phenomenological method to identify essential experiential themes.

Results: The findings indicate that students construct moral meaning through concrete, relational, and religiously grounded experiences rather than abstract reasoning. Emotional regulation appears developmental and context-dependent, marked by performance-related anxiety and shaped through teacher-mediated classroom interactions.

Theoretical Contribution: This research provides phenomenological insight into the co-emergence of moral cognition and emotional regulation within Islamic primary school. These findings broaden the perspective of moral development by highlighting the role of teacher co-regulation in Islamic faith-based learning environments.

Implication: Islamic Religious Education classrooms can be understood as moral–emotional learning spaces where relational pedagogy plays a crucial role. Emotion-sensitive and dialogical teaching practices may support more meaningful moral internalization in Islamic primary school contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Moral cognition and emotional regulation are central concerns in contemporary discussions of elementary education, particularly in contexts where value-based learning is explicitly embedded within the curriculum (Croitoru & Munteanu, 2014; Metcalfe & Moulin-Stožek, 2021). Moral cognition in this research refers to processes through which individuals perceive, interpret, and evaluate moral situations, including judgments about right and wrong, and sensitivity to fairness and empathy (Kohlberg, 1984; Piaget, 2013; Tambun et al., 2025). Rather than being purely rational, moral cognition is shaped by developmental stages and sociocultural contexts that influence how moral meaning is constructed and experienced (Le Pargneux, 2025).

Moral cognition has increasingly been understood as a multidimensional construct that integrates cognitive, affective, and relational components rather than functioning as a purely rational domain. Contemporary developmental scholarship emphasizes that moral understanding is embedded within lived social contexts where individuals negotiate norms through interaction and shared meaning-making. This perspective shifts the focus from moral reasoning as an abstract internal process toward moral experience as a situated phenomenon shaped by relational and cultural dynamics (Farahani & Dabbagh, 2025; Tambun et al., 2025). Emotional regulation, meanwhile, refers to the ability to recognize, manage, and respond to emotional experiences in socially adaptive ways (Campos-Berga et al., 2025; Cheung et al., 2024).

In childhood, emotional regulation remains dynamic and context-dependent, often shaped by interpersonal environments and relational support systems. Within educational settings, emotional regulation is closely linked to classroom interaction and social experience, making it an important dimension of moral development. In early schooling, students are not only expected to acquire cognitive knowledge but also to internalize moral norms and develop adaptive emotional responses that guide their social interactions (Nucci et al., 2014; Santrock, 2014). Within faith-based educational environments, these developmental processes are often intertwined with

religious teachings that shape students' understanding of right and wrong through both instruction and lived experience (Nucci et al., 2014; Santrock, 2014).

Recent advances in socio-emotional learning research further highlight that emotional regulation is not merely an individual psychological skill but a relationally mediated process that unfolds within meaningful social environments. Educational psychologists have increasingly emphasized that children's emotional experiences are shaped by the symbolic and evaluative nature of classroom activities, particularly in value-laden learning contexts. This relational view positions emotional regulation as a process that is co-constructed through interaction rather than solely controlled internally (Álvarez-Couto & Sáez-Suanes, 2023; Dillman-Taylor et al., 2023). Studies on moral cognition suggest that children's moral reasoning during middle childhood tends to remain concrete and context-dependent, often relying on external norms and authority structures.

Developmental perspectives emphasize that moral understanding at this stage is strongly influenced by social interaction, relational experiences, and emotional cues encountered in everyday learning environments (Kohlberg, 1984; Piaget, 2013). Contemporary studies further highlight that moral cognition emerges from dynamic interactions between developmental maturation and contextual experiences rather than from purely rational processes (Le Pargneux, 2025; Tambun et al., 2025). This developmental orientation underscores the importance of examining moral cognition within naturalistic educational settings where children encounter morally salient situations in real time.

Rather than treating moral reasoning as detached from lived experience, scholars increasingly advocate for approaches that attend to how children make sense of moral situations as they unfold within everyday relational contexts. Such perspectives align with sociocultural and phenomenological views that situate moral development within lived interaction (Acerbi & Sacco, 2023; Songhorian, 2022). Similarly, studies on emotional regulation indicate that students in late childhood are still developing the capacity to interpret, manage, and express emotions in socially appropriate ways. Emotional regulation during this period is closely associated with

executive functioning, social interaction, and experiential learning contexts (Campos-Berga et al., 2025).

Children's ability to regulate emotions is also shaped by their awareness of internal emotional states and physiological responses, which influence how they cope with socially demanding situations (Cheung et al., 2024). These developmental processes are therefore not isolated but unfold through continuous interaction between cognitive interpretation and emotional experience. Emerging literature suggests that emotional development during late childhood is especially sensitive to environmental affordances and relational scaffolding. Classroom environments that provide emotional safety and supportive interaction tend to facilitate more adaptive emotional responses, whereas evaluative or performance-oriented contexts may intensify affective vulnerability.

This reinforces the notion that emotional regulation must be understood within the broader ecology of learning experiences rather than as an isolated developmental variable (Campos-Berga et al., 2025; Cheung et al., 2024). In educational settings, the relationship between moral understanding and emotional regulation becomes particularly visible during classroom interaction (John & Bates, 2023; Nikooyeh et al., 2017). Students in elementary classrooms frequently encounter relational situations involving fairness, cooperation, and performance-related tension, which engage both moral interpretation and emotional experience (Cheung et al., 2024; Piaget, 2013; Santrock, 2014).

While earlier studies have tended to examine moral cognition and emotional regulation separately, recent scholarship increasingly highlights their interconnected nature within lived social experience (Le Pargneux, 2025; Tambun et al., 2025). There is growing recognition that these domains are mutually constitutive, especially in value-oriented learning environments where moral meaning is embedded within relational experience (Acerbi & Sacco, 2023; Songhorian, 2022). This integrative perspective invites a shift from compartmentalized developmental models toward holistic understandings of moral-emotional functioning. Rather than viewing cognition and emotion as parallel domains, scholars increasingly conceptualize them as intertwined dimensions of lived experience that co-evolve through interaction.

Such an approach is particularly relevant in contexts where moral values are explicitly embedded within pedagogical practice. Within Islamic educational contexts, particularly Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (Islamic primary schools), moral formation is a foundational objective of schooling. Islamic Religious Education (IRE) is not merely designed to transmit doctrinal knowledge but to cultivate akhlaq (moral character) through daily practice, modeling, and reflection (Madjid et al., 2021; Shodiq et al., 2025). In such settings, moral understanding is often mediated through religious narratives, ritual practices, and teacher authority, which together shape how students interpret moral norms in lived situations (Nucci et al., 2014; Songhorian, 2022).

At the same time, emotionally charged moments—such as public recitation, correction by teachers, or peer comparison—can evoke anxiety, embarrassment, or empathy, indicating that emotional regulation plays a significant role in how moral meaning is experienced and negotiated (Bock et al., 2024; Marín-Morales et al., 2022). Faith-based classrooms offer a distinctive moral ecology where ethical meaning is inseparable from religious symbolism and collective practice (Aqodiah et al., 2023). In such environments, moral instruction is embedded within ritualized and relational experiences that shape how students internalize values. This suggests that understanding moral development in Islamic schooling requires attention not only to doctrinal content but also to the lived textures of classroom interaction.

In the Indonesian context, Madrasah Ibtidaiyah represents a unique educational environment where religious values, cultural norms, and pedagogical practices intersect (Kurniawan et al., 2025; Zamsiswaya et al., 2024). Yet, few studies have examined how students in these settings actually experience moral learning and emotional challenges during classroom interaction. Understanding students' perspectives is particularly important because moral internalization is not solely shaped by instructional content but also by how students interpret and emotionally respond to everyday educational encounters (Tambun et al., 2025; Yani et al., 2026). Moreover, Indonesian Islamic elementary education operates within a complex sociocultural landscape where local traditions and global educational discourses intersect (Mahfud et al., 2024).

This complexity underscores the need for context-sensitive research that captures how students navigate moral and emotional experiences within culturally grounded educational settings. Despite increasing scholarly interest in character education and socio-emotional learning, most empirical studies on moral cognition and emotional regulation have been conducted within secular educational frameworks (Dillman-Taylor et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2024). As a result, there remains limited understanding of how these developmental processes unfold in faith-based classrooms where moral norms are explicitly grounded in religious values. Moreover, existing studies tend to rely on quantitative or experimental approaches that prioritize measurement over lived experience, leaving the experiential dimension of moral-emotional development underexplored (Le Pargneux, 2025; Songhorian, 2022).

Phenomenology offers a useful framework for addressing this gap because it emphasizes the exploration of lived experience as perceived by participants. Rather than testing causal relationships, a phenomenological approach seeks to uncover how individuals make sense of their experiences and how meaning emerges through interaction with their social and cultural environment. Descriptive phenomenology, in particular, aims to identify essential structures of experience by bracketing presuppositions and attending closely to participants' narratives (Colaizzi, 1978). By adopting a descriptive phenomenological approach, this research focuses on students' experiential accounts of moral situations and emotional responses during Islamic Religious Education lessons in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah.

Instead of positioning moral cognition and emotional regulation as separate constructs, the research explores how these processes co-emerge within classroom interaction and how they are shaped by relational dynamics, pedagogical practices, and religious framing. This research therefore addresses a critical gap in the literature by examining the intersection of moral cognition and emotional regulation within a faith-based elementary education context through the lens of students' lived experiences. Specifically, it seeks to explore how moral cognition is constructed, how emotions are experienced and managed, and how teacher-student interactions shape these processes in everyday classroom life.

By situating the inquiry within a phenomenological framework, this research aims to contribute to ongoing discussions on moral development and socio-emotional learning by providing context-sensitive insight from Islamic primary school. Rather than offering universal claims, the research intends to illuminate how moral and emotional experiences are intertwined within religious classroom settings and how these experiences may inform more relational and contextually grounded approaches to character education.

METHODS

Research Design

This research employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design to explore students' lived experiences of moral cognition and emotional regulation during Islamic Religious Education (IRE). The research was grounded in the Husserlian phenomenological tradition, which seeks to describe the essence of experience as perceived by participants rather than to construct interpretive or causal explanations (Husserl, 1970). This orientation aligns with the use of Colaizzi's phenomenological method, which emphasizes careful extraction of experiential meanings from participants' narratives (Colaizzi, 1978).

To maintain phenomenological rigor, the research adopted a bracketing stance. The researcher consciously reflected on prior assumptions regarding Islamic education and child morality and documented these reflections in a reflexive journal throughout the research process. This process aimed to minimize theoretical imposition and allow meanings to emerge inductively from participants' accounts.

Research Context

The research was conducted in a Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Jogonalan located in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The school represents a typical urban Islamic educational environment where Islamic Religious Education is taught as a core subject emphasizing moral formation (*akhlaq*) through daily instruction and classroom interaction. Islamic Religious Education lessons in this setting involve Qur'anic recitation, moral storytelling, classroom dialogue, and performance-based activities, which provide rich contexts for observing moral and emotional experiences.

Participants

Participants consisted of eight students: four boys and four girls aged between 8 to 11 years, representing grades 3 to 5 of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah. Students were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: 1) active participation in Islamic Religious Education classes; 2) ability to communicate experiences verbally; and 3) willingness to participate with parental consent.

To provide contextual triangulation, two Islamic Religious Education teachers with more than three years of teaching experience were also included. Teachers were not treated as primary phenomenological subjects but served as complementary informants to support contextual understanding of classroom dynamics.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection. Written informed consent was secured from parents or guardians, and verbal assent was obtained from participating students. Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of the research and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences.

To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for all participants, and identifying information was removed during transcription and reporting. Data were stored securely and used solely for research purposes. Special care was taken during interviews to ensure psychological comfort, particularly given the involvement of student.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted over a three-month period to ensure prolonged engagement and contextual familiarity. Multiple data sources were used to support phenomenological depth and credibility.

Classroom Observations

Non-participant classroom observations were conducted across 12 Islamic Religious Education sessions, each lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. Observations focused on naturally occurring moral situations, emotional expressions,

peer interactions, and teacher responses. Field notes documented both verbal and non-verbal behaviors, including gestures, tone, and classroom atmosphere.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with each student in a quiet room within the school environment. Interviews lasted between 25 and 40 minutes and used child-friendly language. Example prompts included:

“Can you tell me about a time when you felt nervous in IRE class?”

“What makes something right or wrong in class?”

“How do you feel when a friend is treated unfairly?”

The interview guide was developed through an iterative validation process to ensure age-appropriate language and phenomenological relevance. Prior to data collection, the interview prompts were reviewed by two experts in Islamic elementary education and child development to assess clarity, developmental suitability, and potential leading bias. Revisions were made to simplify sentence structure and adapt vocabulary to students’ communicative levels. For example, the initial question “How do you regulate your emotions when facing moral dilemmas?” was revised into the more accessible form, “Can you tell me what you feel when something unfair happens in class?” This refinement ensured that the prompts remained open-ended while being developmentally appropriate and comprehensible for elementary students.

A preliminary pilot interview with two non-participant students was also conducted to evaluate comprehension and conversational flow. The pilot process confirmed that the questions were understandable and did not induce suggestive responses. These steps were taken to enhance the credibility and developmental appropriateness of the interview protocol.

Follow-up probes were used to clarify meanings and encourage narrative depth. Two teacher interviews (45–60 minutes each) were conducted to enrich contextual understanding of classroom interactions.

Document Analysis

Supporting documents, including lesson plans and classroom activity notes, were reviewed to contextualize observed practices and ensure alignment between reported and enacted pedagogy.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological method (Colaizzi, 1978), ensuring systematic and transparent analysis. 1) Familiarization : all interviews were transcribed verbatim and read repeatedly alongside observation notes to gain an overall sense of participants' experiences; 2) Extraction of Significant Statements: Statements directly related to moral understanding and emotional experiences were identified and highlighted; 3) Formulation of Meanings: Each significant statement was interpreted to derive underlying experiential meanings while maintaining fidelity to participants' expressions; 4) Clustering of Themes: Formulated meanings were grouped into thematic clusters reflecting shared experiential structures; 5) Exhaustive Description: An integrated narrative description of the phenomenon was developed to represent the essence of participants' experiences; 6) Fundamental Structure: The essential structure of moral-emotional experience in Islamic Religious Education was distilled into core thematic patterns; 7) Member Validation: Preliminary interpretations were shared with participating teachers to ensure credibility and contextual accuracy.

Coding was not treated as a standalone analytic procedure but was embedded within the iterative stages of Colaizzi's phenomenological analysis. It functioned as an organizational tool for clustering significant statements and facilitating the development of thematic structures. An audit trail documenting analytic decisions was maintained to ensure transparency and rigor.

Trustworthiness

To enhance methodological rigor, several strategies were employed. 1) Triangulation: integration of observations, student interviews, teacher perspectives, and documents; 2) member checking: validation of thematic interpretations with teachers; 3) reflexivity: Maintenance of a reflexive journal to monitor researcher assumptions; 4) Audit Trail: documentation of analytic steps and theme development; 5) Thick Description: detailed contextual reporting to support transferability. These strategies ensured that findings reflected participants' lived experiences while maintaining phenomenological integrity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Moral Cognition among Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Students

Interview and observation data indicate that moral cognition among Madrasah Ibtidaiyah students is frequently constructed through concrete religious language embedded in everyday classroom discourse. Several participants expressed moral judgments using symbolic terms such as *dosa* (sin) and *pahala* (divine reward). For example, one student stated, “Lying is a sin, so we should not do it” (A.R.), while another noted that helping friends brings *pahala*. These expressions illustrate how moral meaning is articulated through experiential encounters with religious authority and classroom religious narratives rather than through abstract ethical reasoning. Observational data further confirmed that students relied on religious vocabulary when explaining right and wrong actions, suggesting that religious language functions as a primary interpretive framework for moral evaluation.

From a developmental perspective, the reliance on concrete symbolic language aligns with theories of moral cognition in middle childhood, which emphasize that moral reasoning at this stage remains context-bound and authority-oriented (Kohlberg, 1984; Piaget, 2013). Children tend to interpret moral norms through culturally available symbols and external evaluative frameworks rather than through autonomous moral reasoning. This supports contemporary views that moral cognition emerges from the interaction between developmental maturity and sociocultural scaffolding that provides accessible moral meaning systems (Le Pargneux, 2025; Tambun et al., 2025).

Within Islamic educational discourse, the use of symbolic moral vocabulary reflects the pedagogical tradition of internalizing ethical values through habituation and linguistic framing (Kurniawan et al., 2025). Islamic teachings emphasize the association between actions and moral consequences as a foundational mechanism for moral formation. Qur’anic references such as Qur’an 99:7–8 highlight the moral weight of even the smallest actions, while prophetic traditions on intention and accountability (Al-Bukhari, Hadith no.1; Muslim, Hadith no. 1907) reinforce the centrality of moral intentionality. In this context, religious expressions such as *dosa*

and *pahala* function not merely as doctrinal terms but as lived moral categories that structure students' ethical awareness.

Beyond religious terminology, moral cognition was also constructed through classroom norms and relational expectations embedded in daily interaction. Students frequently referred to fairness in turn-taking, obedience to teachers, and maintaining classroom harmony as indicators of moral conduct. Observations revealed that situations involving skipped turns, unequal opportunities, or teasing often triggered strong evaluative responses. Students demonstrated clear sensitivity toward perceived injustice, while spontaneous empathetic responses—such as comforting distressed peers—were also observed during emotionally charged moments.

This pattern reflects sociocultural models of moral development, which propose that moral reasoning is shaped through participation in shared norms and relational practices (Nucci et al., 2014; Santrock, 2014). Rather than emerging solely from internal deliberation, moral understanding develops through engagement with everyday social structures that define acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Classroom routines therefore function as moral scaffolding that enables students to interpret fairness and injustice within concrete relational contexts.

From an Islamic ethical perspective, students' strong sensitivity toward fairness resonates with foundational teachings on justice (*'adl*) in Islamic tradition. The Qur'an consistently emphasizes the obligation to uphold justice (*Qur'an*, 16:90) and warns against bias and unfair judgment (*Qur'an*, 5:8). Prophetic traditions further prohibit oppression and unjust treatment (Muslim, Hadith no. 2577) and emphasize ethical responsibility in social relations (Muslim, Hadith no. 2564). These teachings also highlight the broader moral consequences of injustice, including the erosion of trust and social harmony. The alignment between students' moral reactions and Islamic ethical principles suggests that classroom moral experiences are deeply embedded within broader religious moral frameworks.

Taken together, these findings suggest that moral cognition among Madrasah Ibtidaiyah students is both concrete and relational, emerging from the intersection of symbolic religious language and lived classroom interaction. Moral understanding does not appear as an abstract cognitive construct but as an experiential process

shaped by authority, relational dynamics, and culturally embedded moral narratives. This reinforces the view that moral cognition in faith-based elementary education is best understood as a socially situated and culturally mediated phenomenon rather than a purely individual reasoning process.

Emotional Regulation among Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Students

Interview and observational data indicate that emotional regulation among Madrasah Ibtidaiyah students is still developing and closely tied to experiential learning contexts. Several participants described difficulty managing nervousness and embarrassment during classroom activities that involve public exposure. For instance, one student stated, “When the teacher asks me to recite in front of the class, my heart beats fast” (S.F.), reflecting how emotionally intense situations are experienced as overwhelming rather than strategically regulated. Observations corroborated these narratives, showing visible hesitation, lowered voice, and avoidance of eye contact during public religious performance. These accounts suggest that emotional regulation is not yet fully internalized but remains emergent and situationally fragile.

From a developmental standpoint, this pattern aligns with research indicating that emotional regulation during middle childhood continues to evolve alongside cognitive and social maturation (Campos-Berga et al., 2025; Cheung et al., 2024). Children at this stage often rely on external scaffolding—such as reassurance from teachers or peer modeling—when navigating emotionally demanding situations. Rather than representing a lack of emotional competence, fluctuating emotional control reflects the transitional nature of regulatory development during late childhood, where internal strategies are still consolidating.

Within Islamic educational discourse, the developmental nature of emotional regulation resonates with pedagogical traditions that emphasize gradual character formation through guidance and habituation (*tarbiyah*). Islamic teachings recognize emotional struggle as part of moral growth, as reflected in the encouragement toward patience (*sabr*) during challenging situations (*Qur'an*, 2:153). Prophetic traditions similarly emphasize gentleness and compassion in guiding learners (Al-Bukhari, hadith no. 6125), suggesting that emotional vulnerability in learning contexts should be met with supportive mentorship rather than punitive evaluation. These

perspectives reinforce the view that emotional development in Islamic schooling is understood as a guided moral journey rather than an immediate individual competence.

Beyond developmental immaturity, emotional regulation also appeared highly context-dependent, shaped by the perceived moral and social significance of classroom activities. Emotional intensity was particularly evident during performative religious practices such as Qur'anic recitation, public correction, or comparative evaluation. Students' reactions varied depending on the level of social exposure, indicating that emotional experiences were deeply embedded within relational dynamics rather than arising in isolation. Observations revealed that situations involving moral visibility—where students felt morally evaluated by teachers or peers—often triggered stronger emotional responses.

This contextual sensitivity aligns with socio-emotional theories emphasizing that emotional regulation is shaped by environmental affordances and relational meaning systems (Álvarez-Couto & Sáez-Suanes, 2023; Cheung et al., 2024). Emotional responses are not merely internally generated but co-constructed through interaction with social expectations and symbolic contexts. In morally charged environments, emotions tend to intensify because they are intertwined with identity, belonging, and perceived moral worth.

From an Islamic ethical perspective, the contextual nature of emotional regulation can be understood through the concept of emotional intentionality and moral accountability. Islamic teachings emphasize the regulation of emotions in socially meaningful contexts, encouraging believers to restrain negative emotional reactions and cultivate composure in public conduct (*Qur'an*, 3:134). Prophetic traditions also highlight emotional moderation and self-control as elements of moral excellence (Al-Tirmidhi, hadith no. 2020). These teachings underscore that emotional responses are morally significant not only internally but also within relational and communal settings. The resonance between students' context-sensitive emotional experiences and Islamic moral psychology suggests that emotional regulation in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah is embedded within broader ethical frameworks that link emotion, morality, and social responsibility.

From a phenomenological perspective, emotionally intense experiences should be understood as meaningful expressions of lived engagement rather than mere indicators of regulatory deficit. Phenomenological scholarship emphasizes that emotions reveal the significance structures of experience, where heightened affect signals the perceived importance of a situation within an individual's lifeworld (Colaizzi, 1978). Within this interpretive frame, students' nervousness and embarrassment may reflect the lived moral weight of religious performance rather than emotional instability per se. Emotional intensity thus becomes an experiential marker of how deeply moral expectations are internalized within classroom life.

Taken together, these findings suggest that emotional regulation among Madrasah Ibtidaiyah students is both developmental and situational, emerging through the interplay of maturation, relational context, and moral meaning. Emotional responses appear amplified in contexts where moral expectations are salient, indicating that emotional vulnerability may reflect the lived seriousness of moral participation rather than a simple lack of regulatory competence. This perspective reinforces the need to understand emotional regulation in faith-based classrooms as a relationally mediated and meaning-laden phenomenon.

Learning Interactions in Moral Cognition and Emotional Regulation among Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Students

A prominent dimension of the findings concerns the relational role of teachers in shaping both moral cognition and emotional regulation. Participants consistently described how teacher presence, reassurance, and tone influenced their emotional responses during challenging moments. For instance, one student explained, "When the teacher tells me to take it slowly, I feel calmer" (N.A.), illustrating how emotional comfort often emerged through interpersonal interaction rather than individual coping strategies. Observations also revealed that teachers frequently approached hesitant students, offering encouragement and adjusting communicative styles to create emotional safety. Teachers themselves acknowledged this relational orientation, emphasizing intentional efforts to reduce anxiety and maintain supportive classroom atmospheres.

These findings align with a substantial body of educational research emphasizing the importance of teacher closeness and emotional attunement in learning interactions. Studies on teacher–student relationships consistently show that emotional support, warmth, and attentiveness contribute significantly to students’ socio-emotional development and academic engagement (Pianta et al., 2012; Roorda et al., 2017). Close teacher–student relationships foster psychological safety, enabling learners to regulate emotions more effectively during challenging tasks and evaluative situations. In elementary contexts, teacher responsiveness has been shown to function as an external regulatory scaffold that supports children’s emerging emotional self-regulation.

Within the present research, these relational dynamics appeared particularly salient in moments where moral meaning and emotional vulnerability intersected. Students did not describe emotional regulation as an internalized individual skill but as something that emerged through interaction with caring authority figures. This observation resonates with developmental perspectives highlighting the intersubjective nature of emotional regulation, where regulatory capacities are gradually internalized through repeated experiences of co-regulation (Campos-Berga et al., 2025; Cheung et al., 2024). The findings extend this perspective by illustrating how emotional and moral experiences intertwine within faith-based classrooms, where authority is simultaneously pedagogical and moral.

From an Islamic education standpoint, this integration reflects a pedagogical tradition that emphasizes the moral and relational responsibility of teachers in shaping learners’ character. Classical Islamic scholarship underscores the centrality of compassionate mentorship in moral formation, where educators function not merely as transmitters of knowledge but as moral exemplars (*uswah hasanah*). Teachings that emphasize gentleness and empathy in guidance (*Qur’an*, 3:159) and prophetic traditions encouraging kindness in teaching (Al-Bukhari, Hadith no. 69) reinforce the importance of relational pedagogy in Islamic learning environments. Contemporary Islamic education scholars similarly highlight that moral internalization is deeply influenced by emotionally responsive teacher–student

relationships that integrate authority with care (Nucci et al., 2014; Shodiq et al., 2025).

The notion of pedagogical co-regulation emerging from these findings contributes to ongoing discussions on character education by emphasizing that moral internalization in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah is deeply embedded in emotionally responsive teacher–student relationships. Emotional balance appears to emerge intersubjectively, shaped by teacher presence that integrates moral authority with emotional care. This relational configuration suggests that the effectiveness of moral education in Islamic elementary contexts cannot be separated from the affective quality of pedagogical interaction, where ethical understanding is cultivated through lived relational experience rather than solely through doctrinal instruction.

Construction of the theory in a phenomenological approach

As a phenomenological synthesis of the findings, the model below represents the intersubjective structure of moral and emotional experience as lived by students within Islamic Religious Education contexts.

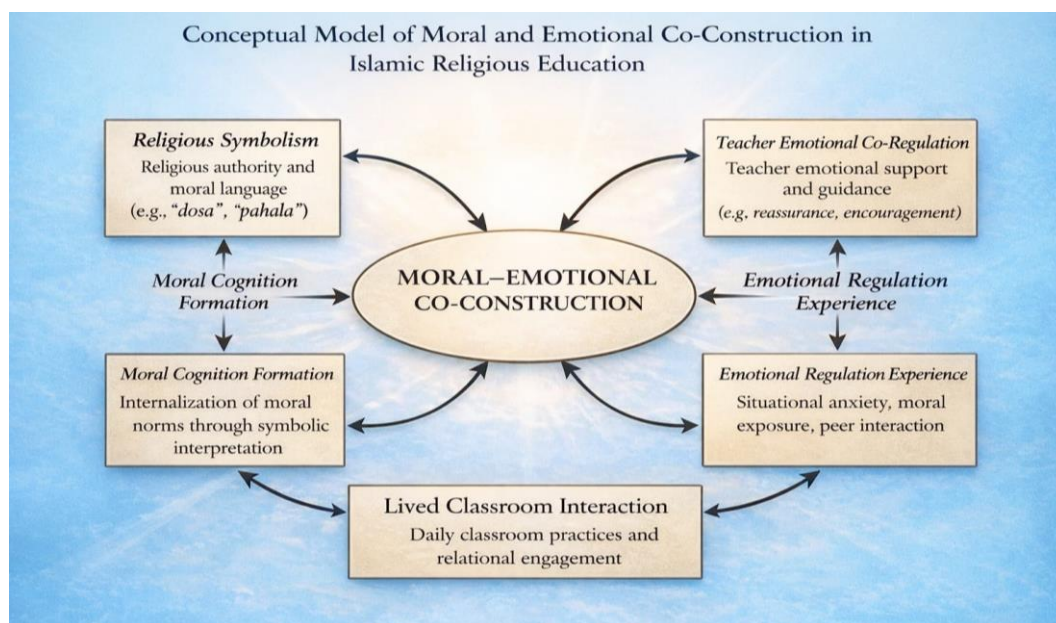


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Moral and Emotional Co-Construction in Islamic Religious Education

Figure 1. Conceptual model illustrating the co-construction of moral cognition and emotional regulation in Islamic Religious Education classrooms. The model highlights the integration of religious symbolism, teacher co-regulation, and lived classroom interaction in shaping students' moral–emotional development.

Table 1. Summary of Phenomenological Findings

Core Dimension	Empirical Expressions	Phenomenological Meaning	Educational Implication
Moral Cognition	Students describe right and wrong using religious terms such as <i>dosa</i> and <i>pahala</i> , and show sensitivity to fairness and empathy in peer interactions	Moral cognition is constructed through concrete, relational, and authority-mediated experiences rather than abstract reasoning	Moral learning in Islamic elementary classrooms should emphasize experiential and relational moral engagement
Emotional Regulation	Students experience nervousness, embarrassment, and fear during performative religious activities, especially public recitation	Emotional regulation emerges as situational and morally salient, reflecting the lived weight of religious performance	Emotional support is needed during morally meaningful learning situations
Teacher-Student Interaction	Students report feeling calmer when teachers provide reassurance, encouragement, and gentle guidance	Emotional stability and moral understanding are co-constructed through relational pedagogical encounters (co-regulation)	Teachers function as both moral guides and emotional anchors in faith-based learning
Moral-Emotional Integration	Moral understanding and emotional experience appear intertwined in everyday classroom life	Islamic Religious Education classrooms function as moral-emotional lifeworlds shaped by symbolism, interaction, and lived experience	Character education should integrate moral instruction with emotionally responsive pedagogy

The final column of the table presents educational implications that extend the empirical findings into pedagogical reflections for Islamic elementary education. These implications are discussed below in relation to relevant theoretical and educational frameworks.

First, the findings suggest that moral learning in Islamic elementary classrooms should emphasize experiential and relational moral engagement. The empirical data indicate that students construct moral understanding through lived encounters involving religious symbolism, authority, and peer interaction rather than abstract reasoning. This observation resonates with experiential learning approaches, particularly Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL), which emphasize the role of real-life experiences in shaping moral understanding (Johnson, 2002). Within moral education literature, experiential models are considered effective because they enable students to internalize values through direct engagement rather than passive reception (Nucci et al., 2014). In Islamic pedagogy, experiential moral formation aligns with the tradition of *tarbiyah*, where moral development unfolds through habituation and lived practice rather than doctrinal transmission alone.

Second, the findings highlight the importance of emotional support during morally meaningful learning situations. Students' experiences of nervousness and vulnerability during public religious performances suggest that moral learning is emotionally charged and requires affective scaffolding. Educational psychology literature emphasizes that emotional safety is a prerequisite for meaningful engagement and moral reflection (Roorda et al., 2017). Learning approaches that prioritize emotional development—such as social-emotional learning (SEL) and supportive classroom climate models—have been shown to enhance both emotional regulation and moral engagement (Durlak et al., 2011). In Islamic educational contexts, the cultivation of emotional composure and compassion is closely associated with virtues such as *sabr* (patience) and *rahmah* (compassion), reinforcing the need for pedagogical approaches that integrate emotional nurturing into moral instruction.

Third, the data underline the central role of teachers as both moral guides and emotional supports in faith-based learning environments. Students' narratives consistently portray teachers as figures who regulate the emotional climate while simultaneously embodying moral authority. This dual role reflects broader theories of teacher-student relationships, which conceptualize teachers as co-regulators of students' emotional and moral development (Pianta et al., 2012). Within Islamic education, this relational role is deeply rooted in the concept of the teacher as *murabbi*—a holistic educator responsible for nurturing intellectual, moral, and emotional growth. Classical and contemporary Islamic scholarship consistently emphasize that the credibility of moral instruction depends on the relational integrity and character of the educator (Halstead, 2004; Shodiq et al., 2025). Thus, effective Islamic Religious Education requires teachers who integrate moral exemplarity with emotional attunement.

Finally, the findings suggest that character education in Islamic elementary settings must integrate moral instruction with emotionally responsive pedagogy. The observed intertwining of moral cognition and emotional experience indicates that moral development cannot be separated from affective processes. Contemporary character education frameworks increasingly recognize the integration of cognition,

emotion, and relational experience as central to sustainable moral formation (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Lickona, 1991). In faith-based contexts, this integration becomes even more salient because moral meanings are embedded within symbolic and relational lifeworlds. Islamic Religious Education classrooms therefore function as moral-emotional ecosystems where ethical understanding is cultivated through the convergence of symbolic teaching, relational care, and lived experience.

Taken together, the findings suggest that moral cognition and emotional regulation in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah classrooms are not discrete developmental domains but interwoven dimensions of lived moral experience. Moral meaning emerges through concrete, relational, and religiously mediated encounters rather than abstract ethical reasoning, while emotional regulation unfolds as a context-sensitive and relationally co-constructed process. Teacher-student interactions function as the primary mediating space where moral interpretation and emotional stabilization converge, highlighting the intersubjective nature of moral-emotional development in faith-based educational settings. These findings position Islamic Religious Education classrooms as moral-emotional lifeworlds in which ethical meaning and affective experience are dynamically shaped through religious symbolism, relational pedagogy, and lived classroom interaction.

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that moral cognition is constructed through concrete and relational experiences grounded in religious symbolism and classroom interaction, while emotional regulation emerges as a developmental and context-sensitive process shaped through relational co-regulation with teachers. Theoretically, this research contributes to moral and character education by extending developmental perspectives into culturally embedded and phenomenologically grounded educational settings, demonstrating that moral cognition and emotional regulation are intersubjectively co-constructed rather than individually internalized. In the context of Islamic education, the findings highlight the importance of integrating relational pedagogy with value-based instruction to support holistic moral-emotional development. Practically, the research underscores the need for

emotionally responsive teaching approaches that recognize the co-regulatory role of teachers in shaping students' moral understanding and emotional experience. However, the research is limited by its small-scale phenomenological sample and localized setting, suggesting the need for future research involving diverse cultural contexts, longitudinal designs, and mixed-method approaches to further elaborate the moral-emotional dynamics of faith-based elementary education.

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