

Managing Educational Quality in Islamic Senior High Schools: Academic Character Integration through Strategic Education Management

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Islamic Senior High Schools (Madrasah Aliyah) in Indonesia manage educational quality by systematically integrating academic achievement and character formation through the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle within Total Quality Management (TQM) frameworks. Unlike previous research treating character education as supplementary, this study positions it as strategic management. Using a qualitative multiple-case study design, data were collected from three State Islamic Senior High Schools through interviews, observations, focus groups, and document analysis. The study investigated PDCA implementation in each school and patterns across institutional contexts. Findings reveal three management models: (1) structural-regulative (MAN X), emphasizing discipline through strict SOPs; (2) community-collaborative (MAN Y), integrating *pesantren* culture and parental involvement; and (3) innovation-capacity oriented (MAN Z), cultivating literacy and 21st-century skills. Cross-case analysis shows all schools applied PDCA principles—strategic planning (Plan), consistent implementation (Do), integrated evaluation (Check), and improvement (Act). Educational quality in faith-based schools is enhanced when academic and character dimensions are embedded throughout the management cycle. This research demonstrates how TQM-PDCA frameworks can be contextualized for faith-based schools in developing countries and identifies critical gaps in quality systems that require strengthening.

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INTRODUCTION

Improving educational quality has become a central concern in contemporary education systems, particularly in institutions expected to integrate academic achievement with moral and character formation (Chabibi et al., 2025; Hamdanah et al., 2025; Isa et al., 2024). In the context of Islamic education, madrasahs are increasingly required not only to produce academically competitive graduates but also to cultivate students with strong Islamic values and ethical responsibility (Afandi, 2026; Fitriyah et al., 2026). This expectation aligns with the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs' vision of madrasahs as centers of excellence that combine intellectual competence, religious moderation, and character development (Ar et al., 2025; Fahrudin & Warti'ah, 2023; M. Huda et al., 2024; Jaedun et al., 2024; Kosim et al., 2023; Setiawan et al., 2025). Consequently, educational quality in madrasahs can no longer be measured solely through academic outcomes, but must also reflect the successful integration of character education within institutional practices and learning systems.

Despite this expectation, many madrasahs continue to experience fragmentation between academic management and character education implementation (Darmawangsa, 2024; Taufiq et al., 2025). Character formation is often positioned as a complementary or extracurricular agenda rather than systematically embedded within institutional governance, curriculum planning, leadership practices, and quality assurance mechanisms (Jannana et al., 2025; Lathifah et al., 2025; Rahayu & Dong, 2023). This fragmentation creates an imbalance in educational outcomes, where academic excellence may not be accompanied by ethical maturity, or conversely, strong moral behavior is not supported by adequate academic achievement. Such conditions contradict the holistic orientation of Islamic education, which emphasizes the balanced development of intellectual, spiritual, and moral dimensions (Haningsih & Budiwati, 2021).

Previous studies have widely discussed character education in Islamic schools; however, most focus primarily on pedagogical or behavioral aspects rather than institutional quality management processes. Research by Amilda et al and Switri et al emphasizes curriculum integration and religious learning practices in shaping student character (Alam & Ohidujjaman, 2025; Amalia, 2026; Amilda et al., 2023; Ghani et al., 2025; Hussain, 2025; Mubarak & Nadhir, 2025; Switri et al., 2025). Pike et al. (2020) and Villacís et al. (2021) highlight the role of moral literacy, values education, and school culture in influencing students' ethical behavior (Pike et al., 2020; Villacís et al., 2021). Other studies examine religiosity, behavioral transformation, and extracurricular activities as instruments for strengthening character education (Miseliunaite et al., 2022; Spsychalski, 2023; Yatim et al., 2023). While these studies contribute important insights into instructional and sociocultural dimensions of character education, they provide a limited explanation of how educational institutions systematically manage, evaluate, and sustain the integration of academic excellence and character formation through organizational quality frameworks. As a result, character education is frequently examined as an isolated educational practice rather than as part of a continuous institutional improvement system.

This gap indicates the need for a managerial perspective capable of explaining how Islamic educational institutions operationalize integrated quality improvement. In this regard, Total Quality Management (TQM) offers a relevant framework because it emphasizes continuous improvement, stakeholder engagement, process orientation, and systematic evaluation in organizational management (Mohsen et al., 2025). Within TQM, the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle functions as an operational mechanism that enables institutions to design programs, implement policies, evaluate outcomes, and continuously refine institutional practices. Previous research demonstrates that PDCA-based quality management contributes to educational improvement through systematic planning, instructional innovation, and evidence-based evaluation processes. However, studies examining the application of TQM-PDCA specifically for integrating academic quality and Islamic character education in madrasahs remain limited. Existing research generally discusses educational quality and character education separately, leaving insufficient understanding of how both dimensions are institutionally integrated within a sustainable quality management cycle.

Therefore, this study investigates how three Madrasah Aliyah implement TQM principles through the PDCA cycle to integrate academic excellence and character education within institutional quality management practices. Using a qualitative multi-site approach, this study examines how planning, implementation, evaluation, and continuous improvement processes are operationalized in different madrasah contexts. Unlike previous studies that predominantly focus on pedagogical practices or student behavior, this research positions character education as an integral component of institutional quality management. Accordingly, the study contributes to Islamic education research by offering a managerial and systemic understanding of how madrasahs can sustain holistic educational quality through the integration of academic achievement and Islamic character formation.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design to examine how Islamic Senior High Schools (*Madrasah Aliyah*) systematically integrate academic excellence and character education within institutional quality management practices. A multiple-case approach was selected because the study sought to identify both shared patterns and contextual variations in the implementation of quality management across different institutional settings (Ba et al., 2025; Creswell, 2018). Rather than measuring effectiveness quantitatively, the study aimed to generate an in-depth understanding of how integration processes are planned, implemented, evaluated, and continuously improved within real educational contexts.

The research was conducted in three State Islamic Senior High Schools, hereafter referred to as MAN X, MAN Y, and MAN Z. The schools were selected purposively using two principal criteria. First, the institutions had publicly recognized reputations for integrating academic achievement and character education, indicated through documented school programs, institutional achievements, curriculum initiatives, and recommendations from regional madrasah supervisors. Innovation in this study, therefore, refers not merely to technological adoption but to the institutional capacity to systematically combine academic quality programs with structured character-building initiatives within school governance and learning practices. Second, the schools represented different socio-geographical contexts, including urban and semi-urban environments across different regencies/cities. Geographic variation was considered important because institutional culture, stakeholder expectations, and resource availability potentially influence how quality management systems are operationalized in madrasahs. The selection of three cases was considered sufficient for analytical comparison because the objective of the study was not statistical generalization, but analytical generalization through cross-case pattern identification and contextual interpretation.

Analytical Framework

This study employed Total Quality Management (TQM), particularly the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle, as a sensitizing analytical framework rather than a rigid classificatory model. The PDCA cycle was used to guide the interpretation of institutional quality management processes while allowing themes to emerge inductively from the data. In this study, the four dimensions of PDCA were operationalized as follows: (1) Plan referred to institutional goal-setting, strategic planning, and curriculum design related to academic and character integration; (2) Do referred to implementation practices in teaching, school culture, leadership, and student development activities; (3) Check referred to monitoring, evaluation, supervision, and assessment mechanisms; and (4) Act referred to institutional reflection, policy refinement, and continuous improvement initiatives. The framework enabled systematic comparison across cases while remaining sufficiently flexible to capture context-specific practices beyond predetermined TQM categories (Ricardo et al., 2025).

Data Collection

Data were collected over multiple field visits through four complementary techniques: observations, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis. Observations focused on institutional culture, classroom interactions, religious activities, leadership practices, and quality assurance processes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with madrasah principals, vice principals, and teachers to explore institutional policies, implementation practices, and

challenges in integrating academic achievement with character education. To enrich and validate individual perspectives, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were also conducted with teachers and staff, enabling the researchers to identify shared experiences, differing viewpoints, and recurring themes across participants. In addition, various institutional documents such as strategic plans, school regulations, curriculum guidelines, quality assurance reports, and student development programs were analyzed to provide contextual support and strengthen data triangulation.

A total of 28 participants were involved across the three sites: 7 participants at MAN X, 12 participants at MAN Y, and 9 participants at MAN Z. Participants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement in institutional planning, curriculum implementation, student development, and quality assurance processes. This combination of leadership and practitioner perspectives was intended to capture both managerial and operational dimensions of educational quality integration.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), involving iterative processes of data condensation, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification. Analysis began with open coding to identify recurring themes emerging from interviews, observations, and documents (Huberman & Miles, 2002; Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, 2014). These initial codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories related to institutional planning, implementation, evaluation, and improvement processes. At a later stage, the PDCA framework was employed as an interpretive lens to organize and compare themes across cases rather than as a predetermined coding structure imposed from the outset. This approach was intended to reduce confirmation bias and preserve the inductive character of qualitative inquiry.

To enhance analytical rigor, the study employed source triangulation and methodological triangulation by comparing findings across interviews, observations, FGDs, and institutional documents. Member checking was also conducted with several participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations and emerging findings. Furthermore, cross-case comparison was used to identify recurring patterns as well as contextual differences among the three madrasahs. These procedures strengthened the credibility, dependability, and interpretive validity of the study findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Individual Case Analysis

Case 1: PDCA Implementation at MAN X – Discipline, Supervision, and Institutional Control

Plan Phase: Regulatory-Based Quality Planning

The planning process at MAN X was characterized by a highly structured managerial orientation emphasizing discipline, formal regulation, and behavioural control. Institutional planning documents, school regulations, and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) consistently linked academic achievement with expectations regarding student conduct, religious practice, and classroom discipline. Rather than treating character education as a separate program, the school embedded behavioural expectations into administrative and academic governance structures.

This approach reflects a quality management orientation in which institutional order and consistency are viewed as prerequisites for both academic achievement and character formation. However, the findings suggest that the dominant logic of planning at MAN X was largely procedural and compliance-oriented. Character formation was framed primarily through behavioural regulation, indicating that the school conceptualized educational quality in terms of observable discipline and adherence to institutional norms.

Do Phase: Character Formation Through Habituation and Teacher Supervision

Implementation at MAN X relied heavily on routine habituation practices and intensive teacher supervision. Daily activities such as dhuha prayer, Qur'anic recitation, classroom discipline, and attendance monitoring were systematically supervised by teachers. In this context, teachers functioned not only as instructional actors but also as behavioural monitors and moral exemplars. Several participants perceived this approach as contributing positively to both academic discipline and student responsibility. As SYT explained:

“Discipline in managing learning teaches students discipline, and firmness in discipline teaches students responsibility. The friendliness of teachers instills compassion in students. All these processes ultimately shape students’ character.” [SYT]

This statement illustrates how institutional actors interpreted quality management processes and character formation as mutually reinforcing. Nevertheless, the findings do not provide sufficient evidence to conclude a direct causal relationship between disciplinary supervision and improved moral character. Instead, the data indicate that the school successfully created a highly regulated learning environment that encouraged behavioural conformity and academic order. Whether such practices fostered deeper moral internalization among students remains less clear. Moreover, the implementation model demonstrated strong dependence on teacher consistency and leadership control. The effectiveness of habituation practices appeared contingent upon sustained supervision, raising questions about the long-term sustainability of character formation once external monitoring decreases.

Check Phase: Dual-Oriented Evaluation

The evaluation stage at MAN X integrated academic performance indicators with behavioural monitoring as part of its PDCA-based quality assurance mechanism. Student assessment encompassed examination scores, attendance records, disciplinary reports, participation in religious activities, and teacher observations concerning student conduct. This integration reflects the institution’s effort to construct character education as an inseparable component of educational quality rather than merely an additional moral agenda.

Nevertheless, the findings indicate that the implementation of behavioural evaluation remained largely administrative and compliance-oriented. Evidence from interviews and school documentation showed that behavioural assessment primarily relied on narrative teacher observations, disciplinary records, and attendance monitoring, while systematic instruments for measuring moral reasoning, empathy, or internalized ethical awareness were absent. As a result, the assessment process was highly dependent on teachers’ subjective interpretations and institutional norms, potentially creating inconsistencies in judgment across classrooms and evaluators.

The analysis further suggests that the evaluation mechanism functioned more effectively in regulating visible student behaviour than in capturing transformative dimensions of character formation. Although school administrators frequently associated discipline enforcement with increased academic focus and responsibility, the data did not provide sufficient empirical evidence to establish a direct causal relationship between behavioural compliance and improved learning outcomes. Alternative explanations, including differences in family background, prior student disposition, peer environment, or socio-economic support, were not systematically examined within the evaluation framework.

Moreover, the dominance of formal monitoring indicators within the PDCA cycle revealed a managerial tendency to prioritize measurable compliance over reflective character development (Komariyatul Mahmuda, 2025). This finding demonstrates a broader tension within character-based educational management: while behavioural accountability can strengthen institutional order and standardization, it does not automatically ensure the internalization of ethical values among students. Consequently, the evaluation phase at MAN X appeared successful in maintaining organizational discipline but remained limited in assessing deeper and more transformative aspects of student character development.

Act Phase: Reinforcement and Continuous Supervision

The improvement strategies implemented at MAN X primarily emphasized the reinforcement of institutional discipline, refinement of planning mechanisms, expansion of stakeholder participation, and strengthening of students’ spiritual development. School leaders also promoted parental involvement as an extension of behavioural supervision beyond the school environment, reflecting an understanding that character formation requires continuity between institutional and family contexts.

However, the findings indicate that the “Act” phase within the PDCA cycle operated predominantly as a mechanism for sustaining and legitimizing existing institutional practices rather than generating transformative revisions grounded in systematic evaluation outcomes. Although routine evaluations and coordination meetings were regularly conducted, the data revealed limited evidence demonstrating how evaluation findings were translated into measurable program modifications, pedagogical innovation, or structural policy changes.

The analysis further suggests that institutional responses to identified problems tended to prioritize procedural reinforcement, such as stricter supervision, repeated socialization of rules, and increased monitoring, rather than critically addressing underlying causes of student behaviour or learning challenges. As a result, corrective actions often reproduced existing managerial patterns instead of facilitating adaptive organizational learning.

This condition reflects an important limitation in the implementation of PDCA at MAN X. While the institution demonstrated strong capacity in planning and operational execution, the reflective dimension of continuous improvement remained comparatively underdeveloped. The absence of data-driven redesign mechanisms indicates that evaluation outcomes functioned more as administrative confirmation tools than as catalysts for institutional transformation. Consequently, the PDCA cycle at MAN X appeared effective in maintaining organizational stability and behavioural control, yet less effective in fostering critical institutional learning and sustainable innovation in character education management.

Case 2: PDCA Implementation at MAN Y – Community-Based Character Integration

Plan Phase: Integrating School, Family, and Pesantren Values

Planning at MAN Y emphasized institutional collaboration and socio-religious integration. Academic and character education were deliberately aligned with pesantren traditions and community religious values. School leaders viewed character formation not as the sole responsibility of the institution, but as a shared educational responsibility involving families, teachers, and the surrounding religious community.

This planning orientation reflected a relational and culturally embedded approach to quality management. Unlike MAN X, which emphasized formal discipline, MAN Y framed educational quality through value continuity across students’ social environments. Institutional programs such as Qur’anic recitation, dhuha prayer, home visits, and the 5S culture program (Smile, Greeting, Courtesy, Politeness, Respect) were integrated into strategic planning documents and daily routines.

The findings indicate that this planning model sought to reduce fragmentation between school-based learning and students’ social-religious lives outside the classroom. However, it also created substantial dependence on external stakeholder commitment and community cohesion.

Do Phase: Habituation Through Relational and Spiritual Culture

Implementation at MAN Y was characterized by continuous habituation practices and intensive relational interaction involving the school, family, and pesantren environment. Religious activities were not merely positioned as formal institutional routines but functioned as collective cultural practices intended to shape students’ moral awareness and spiritual discipline in everyday life.

As SHD stated: “Before starting activities, teachers usually remind students to purify their intentions. This is important so students do not forget their purpose in coming to school.”

Similarly, RSN explained:

“Every morning before class starts, we conduct activities like Asmaul Husna recitation, Qur’an recitation, and Shalawat Nariyah. Character development also includes the dhuha prayer with assistance from the BIMTAQ team.”

These findings suggest that character education at MAN Y was embedded through repetitive spiritual practices and relational reinforcement. Unlike MAN X’s supervisory orientation, MAN Y relied more heavily on collective culture, emotional attachment, and spiritual habituation. However, the findings also reveal potential tensions within this approach. Because character formation depended heavily on social cohesion and religious culture, implementation quality varied according to levels of

parental participation, teacher commitment, and pesantren engagement. This indicates that the sustainability of the model may be vulnerable when stakeholder collaboration weakens.

These findings indicate that character education at MAN Y relied heavily on repetitive spiritual habituation and emotional reinforcement within a communal religious culture. In contrast to MAN X, which emphasized institutional supervision and procedural discipline, MAN Y adopted a more relational and spiritually embedded approach in shaping student behaviour. The implementation process, therefore, reflected a socio-cultural model of character formation in which moral values were internalized through collective rituals, teacher exemplification, and sustained interpersonal interaction.

The analysis also reveals several critical limitations within this model. The effectiveness of character formation appeared highly dependent on the consistency of stakeholder participation, particularly parental involvement, teacher commitment, and pesantren collaboration. Data from interviews suggested that students who received limited family supervision or inconsistent religious reinforcement outside school demonstrated weaker behavioural adaptation to institutional expectations. This finding indicates that the success of the habituation model cannot be understood solely as the outcome of school intervention, but rather as the product of broader social and familial support systems.

While repetitive spiritual activities contributed to strengthening religious routines and institutional cohesion, the study found limited evidence demonstrating how these practices translated into measurable long-term transformation in students' ethical reasoning or independent moral agency. The implementation process tended to emphasize ritual participation and behavioural conformity, whereas reflective dimensions of character development were less systematically assessed. Consequently, the sustainability of the model may become vulnerable when communal cohesion weakens or when supporting actors fail to maintain consistent engagement in the character education process.

Check Phase: Community-Inclusive Evaluation

Evaluation practices at MAN Y extended beyond conventional internal school assessment by incorporating feedback from parents and pesantren leaders as part of the character education monitoring process. Student quality was assessed not only through academic achievement and examination outcomes, but also through observations related to worship participation, social interaction, behavioural consistency, and adherence to religious values across both school and home environments (Sriyanto, Suyatno, 2026; Sutriyanti, 2026).

This broader evaluation structure demonstrates that educational quality at MAN Y was understood as a collective responsibility shared among school institutions, families, and religious communities. The integration of multiple stakeholders strengthened relational accountability and enabled the school to monitor student behaviour in a more holistic social context rather than limiting assessment to classroom performance alone.

The findings indicate that character assessment remained predominantly qualitative, interpretive, and socially negotiated in nature. Evaluation procedures relied heavily on narrative observations, informal communication, and subjective judgments from teachers, parents, and pesantren actors, while standardized indicators or systematic measurement instruments were minimally utilized. Consequently, assessment outcomes were strongly influenced by differing perceptions, expectations, and cultural interpretations regarding what constituted "good character."

The analysis further reveals that community-inclusive evaluation simultaneously functioned as both a strength and a methodological limitation. On one hand, collaborative assessment reinforced social control, moral supervision, and continuity of character education across institutional boundaries. On the other hand, the absence of clear evaluative benchmarks created potential inconsistencies in judgment among stakeholders. For example, behaviours interpreted by teachers as indicators of discipline were not always understood similarly by parents or pesantren caregivers, reflecting variations in moral expectations and educational priorities.

Although the evaluation system succeeded in strengthening communal involvement, the data did not sufficiently demonstrate whether this participatory model produced more effective or sustainable

character outcomes compared to more institutionally controlled approaches. The findings, therefore, suggest that while MAN Y successfully institutionalized relational accountability within its evaluation practices, the assessment process remained limited in its capacity to generate objective, comparable, and empirically measurable evidence of transformative character development

Act Phase: Collaborative Improvement Strategies

Improvement initiatives at MAN Y concentrated on strengthening counselling services, conducting home visits, improving educational facilities, and reinforcing quality assurance mechanisms aligned with national education standards. These initiatives reflected the institution's attempt to address student behavioural issues not only through internal disciplinary measures but also through relational intervention involving families and the broader educational environment.

Compared to MAN X, MAN Y demonstrated a relatively stronger orientation toward stakeholder responsiveness. Feedback from parents, pesantren caregivers, and community actors was more actively considered in institutional discussions and contributed to adjustments in student supervision and character development strategies. This indicates that the "Act" phase at MAN Y was shaped by a collaborative understanding of educational improvement rather than relying exclusively on top-down managerial control.

Nevertheless, the findings reveal that the PDCA cycle still experiences limitations in the systematic utilization of evaluative data. Institutional responses were frequently based on informal discussions, personal observations, and relational feedback rather than on structured performance indicators or evidence-based improvement benchmarks. As a consequence, improvement efforts often lacked measurable targets, documented follow-up mechanisms, and clear criteria for assessing the effectiveness of implemented interventions.

The analysis further suggests that while stakeholder participation strengthened institutional adaptability and social responsiveness, the absence of standardized data management reduced the school's capacity to conduct reflective organizational learning in a systematic manner. Corrective actions tended to focus on immediate behavioural problems and contextual adjustments rather than long-term strategic redesign informed by comparative evidence or measurable evaluation outcomes.

This condition demonstrates that the PDCA implementation at MAN Y functioned relatively effectively as a socially responsive management model but remained less developed as a data-driven continuous improvement system. Although collaborative engagement strengthened institutional cohesion and contextual flexibility, the limited translation of evaluation findings into explicit strategic indicators constrained the school's ability to produce sustainable and empirically verifiable educational transformation.

Case 3: PDCA Implementation at MAN Z – Innovation, Literacy, and Future-Oriented Quality

Plan Phase: Integrating Innovation and Character Formation

Planning at MAN Z reflected a future-oriented educational philosophy emphasizing literacy, research culture, entrepreneurship, and 21st-century competencies. Unlike MAN X and MAN Y, which prioritized discipline and spiritual culture, respectively, MAN Z positioned innovation and student creativity as the primary pathways for integrating academic and character development.

Research programs, entrepreneurship training, digital literacy, and project-based learning were formally embedded into curricular and extracurricular planning (Fahmi Husein, Moh Solikul Hadi, 2024). Character education was conceptualized not as moral instruction alone, but as the cultivation of responsibility, perseverance, teamwork, and academic integrity through authentic learning experiences. This planning orientation aligned closely with contemporary educational discourses emphasizing adaptability, creativity, and global competitiveness. However, it also reflected a managerial emphasis on productivity, achievement, and institutional visibility.

Do Phase: Character Development Through Research and Skills Programs

Implementation at MAN Z occurred through student research clubs, entrepreneurship activities, digital marketing programs, and literacy initiatives. As ESP explained:

“MAN Z is a research-based madrasah. We created the MAYORS club to support students in provincial, national, and international competitions. Students are guided from proposal writing to research presentation.” [ESP]

This model integrated character formation into competency-based learning experiences. Responsibility, collaboration, perseverance, and integrity were expected to emerge through participation in projects and competitions rather than through direct moral instruction. The findings indicate that this approach successfully increased student engagement and expanded academic opportunities through active and project-based learning. Students were encouraged to develop research skills, creativity, and learning autonomy while participating in competitions and entrepreneurial activities.

The analysis also reveals that the innovation-oriented model generated pressures related to performance expectations and institutional competitiveness. Students were expected to demonstrate achievement not only academically but also through measurable outputs such as competition results, research productivity, and entrepreneurial performance. As a consequence, educational success became closely associated with institutional visibility and achievement indicators. Therefore, while the model effectively promoted future-oriented competencies and active learning, it also risked shifting educational priorities toward output-oriented performance and institutional prestige rather than deeper transformative character development.

Check Phase: Multi-Dimensional Performance Evaluation

MAN Z adopted a broader evaluation model incorporating academic performance, competition achievements, research outputs, and innovation-based projects. This approach reflected a shift from conventional examination-oriented assessment toward a more competency-based and performance-oriented system.

The findings indicate that this multi-dimensional evaluation structure provided students with wider opportunities to demonstrate their abilities through diverse academic and practical activities. Assessment was not limited to cognitive achievement but also included participation in research, entrepreneurship, collaboration, and creative problem-solving experiences. The analysis reveals that character dimensions such as responsibility, collaboration, perseverance, and integrity remained difficult to assess systematically. These values were generally inferred indirectly through student participation, productivity, and achievement outcomes rather than measured through explicit or standardized indicators. Consequently, character assessment continued to rely heavily on interpretive judgments linked to visible performance.

The evaluation system placed strong emphasis on measurable achievement and competitive outputs. While this strengthened student motivation and institutional productivity, it also risked privileging high-achieving students who were more capable of adapting to competitive learning environments. In contrast, students with lower academic performance or limited access to support resources potentially received less recognition within the evaluation framework. Although MAN Z successfully developed a more innovative and competency-oriented assessment model, the findings suggest that the balance between performance evaluation, educational equity, and holistic character assessment remained a continuing challenge within the PDCA implementation process.

Act Phase: Expansion and Institutional Innovation

Improvement strategies at MAN Z focused on expanding educational infrastructure, strengthening teacher capacity, improving technological facilities, and supporting innovation-based learning programs. Institutional development was strongly oriented toward modernization, competitiveness, and the enhancement of educational quality through technology and research-based activities. The findings indicate that this orientation contributed positively to institutional growth by creating more adaptive learning environments and expanding opportunities for student innovation

and academic achievement. Improvement efforts also reflected the school's commitment to aligning educational practices with contemporary demands for digital competence and future-oriented skills.

The analysis suggests that the sustainability of this model depended heavily on resource availability, leadership vision, and teacher competence. Programs requiring technological integration, research supervision, and innovation-based learning demanded continuous institutional investment and strong managerial coordination. As a result, implementation quality risked becoming uneven across classrooms and programs when institutional support, teacher readiness, or infrastructure access differed. The emphasis on modernization and competitiveness tended to prioritize measurable institutional progress, such as achievements, facilities, and program expansion, while reflective evaluation regarding students' socio-emotional or ethical development received comparatively less attention. This indicates that although MAN Z demonstrated a strong capacity for innovation-driven improvement, maintaining balance between institutional competitiveness and holistic character formation remained an ongoing challenge within the PDCA cycle.

Cross-Case Analysis

TQM-PDCA and the Promise of Holistic Educational Quality

Across the three madrasahs, academic achievement and character formation were consistently framed as interconnected dimensions of educational quality. This finding supports character education scholars such as Lickona, Berkowitz, and Bier, who argue that moral development becomes more effective when embedded within the overall culture of the school rather than implemented as a stand-alone program (M. W. Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Bier, 2014; Thomas, 2012). The integration of religious routines, teacher role modelling, behavioural monitoring, and quality assurance mechanisms across the three cases reflects this whole-school approach to character education.

The findings also complicate dominant assumptions within TQM literature. Classical TQM theorists such as Deming and Sallis emphasize continuous improvement, standardization, accountability, and evidence-based decision-making as key drivers of organizational quality (Baha & Aichouni, 2024; Yan et al., 2025). In contrast, the present study demonstrates that educational quality in madrasahs is not solely produced through formal management systems. Instead, spiritual values, religious traditions, and interpersonal relationships played equally important roles in shaping educational outcomes. This finding extends previous studies on Islamic educational management by suggesting that quality improvement emerges from the interaction between managerial systems and socio-religious cultures rather than from managerial mechanisms alone.

The findings also resonate with critiques of managerialism in education, which argue that excessive reliance on measurable indicators may overlook broader educational purposes (Ball & Ball, 2010; Biesta, 2009). While the three madrasahs successfully incorporated PDCA into their management processes, important aspects of Islamic education, including sincerity (*ikhlas*), moral intentionality, and spiritual development, remained difficult to evaluate through standardized quality indicators. Therefore, the study suggests that TQM-PDCA requires contextual adaptation when applied within Islamic educational settings.

Divergent Pathways of Character Formation

The variations observed among MAN X, MAN Y, and MAN Z support socio-cultural theories of educational leadership, which emphasize that school effectiveness is shaped by local culture, institutional history, and community values rather than by managerial procedures alone. While previous TQM studies frequently portray quality management as a transferable framework that can be applied across institutions with similar outcomes, the present findings indicate that identical PDCA structures may generate substantially different educational practices depending on organizational context.

This finding partially confirms previous research on school-based quality management, which emphasizes the importance of contextual leadership and organizational culture. However, the present study advances this literature by demonstrating that differences in institutional philosophy not only influence implementation strategies but also shape the meaning of character education itself. Discipline-oriented character formation at MAN X, relational-spiritual character formation at MAN Y,

and innovation-based character formation at MAN Z represent distinct interpretations of what constitutes educational quality.

At the same time, the findings challenge assumptions frequently found in character education literature that participation in institutional programs automatically leads to character internalization (Abrori & Hadi, 2020; Ardianto et al., 2026; Aziz et al., 2025; Hermawan, 2025; Z. Z. Huda et al., 2025; Marasabessy et al., 2022; Thahir & Apriliyanti, 2026). Consistent with Biesta's critique of educational effectiveness discourse, the study found limited evidence demonstrating whether compliance, participation, or achievement necessarily translate into deeper moral transformation (Biesta, 2020). Consequently, character development should be understood as a complex and contested process rather than a predictable outcome of institutional intervention.

Structural Weaknesses of PDCA Implementation

One of the most significant findings concerns the limited development of character assessment systems. This finding is consistent with previous studies highlighting the methodological difficulties of assessing moral and character development. Lickona acknowledges that virtues such as integrity, empathy, and moral judgment cannot be fully captured through behavioural indicators alone (Thomas, 2012). Similarly, Berkowitz and Bier argue that character development involves internal processes that are often resistant to conventional assessment techniques (R. Berkowitz, 2021; Bier, 2014).

The study also reveals substantial dependence on principals, BIMTAQ coordinators, and senior teachers. This finding aligns with distributed leadership research, which warns that excessive dependence on individual actors may undermine organizational sustainability (Jing et al., 2025; Nuchpramool & Hsu, 2025; Weibel et al., 2025). Although charismatic and committed leaders can accelerate reform processes, long-term quality improvement requires institutionalization beyond individual leadership capacity.

Furthermore, the weak feedback loop observed across the three cases contrasts with one of the central assumptions of PDCA theory. Deming conceptualized PDCA as a cycle of continuous organizational learning in which evaluation findings directly inform subsequent planning and improvement. However, the present study found that evaluation frequently functioned as an accountability mechanism rather than a catalyst for systematic redesign. This suggests that PDCA implementation in practice may differ substantially from its theoretical formulation.

Beyond Institutional Success Narratives

An important contribution of this study lies in questioning institutional narratives of success that often dominate quality management discourse. Previous studies on educational quality improvement frequently rely on administrative indicators, organizational achievements, or leadership perspectives as evidence of effectiveness. However, critical educational scholars such as Ball (2003) and Biesta (2009) have argued that performance-oriented accountability systems may obscure the lived experiences of students.

The findings of this study support this concern. While school leaders frequently interpreted discipline, religious habituation, and achievement-oriented programs as successful character-building strategies, the available evidence suggests that students may experience these practices differently. Some students may perceive disciplinary systems as supportive structures, whereas others may experience them as restrictive forms of control. Similarly, innovation-oriented programs may foster creativity and resilience while simultaneously generating stress and competitive pressure.

Therefore, rather than confirming a universally successful integration of TQM-PDCA and character education, the study offers a more critical interpretation. The findings suggest that TQM-PDCA functions as a negotiated and context-dependent framework whose outcomes are shaped by tensions between managerial accountability and educational humanism, institutional performance and student well-being, as well as measurable outcomes and spiritual development. In this respect, the study contributes to the growing body of literature calling for more critical and context-sensitive approaches to quality management in education.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Islamic Senior High Schools (*Madrasah Aliyah*) in Indonesia implement quality management systems that systematically integrate academic excellence with character education. Addressing the research questions regarding PDCA cycle implementation and cross-institutional patterns, the findings revealed that each school developed a coherent management strategy aligned with TQM principles. MAN X prioritized discipline and role modeling through structured regulations; MAN Y integrated pesantren and community culture; and MAN Z emphasized literacy and innovation. The analysis confirms that effective integration occurs when embedded throughout the management cycle, planning, implementation, and evaluation, rather than through isolated programs. Future studies should investigate the long-term impacts of integrated quality management on graduate outcomes, explore the implementation of the Act phase more systematically, develop standardized character assessment instruments, and examine how these models adapt in private madrasahs or other regional contexts.

Implications

For school leaders, character education must be institutionalized in vision statements, curriculum planning, and performance evaluations. For policymakers, quality assurance frameworks in madrasahs must address academic and moral domains equally. For teachers and parents, the findings highlight the importance of collaboration and shared responsibility in sustaining quality improvement.

Limitations

This study examined only three state madrasahs in specific Indonesian contexts. The Act phase of the PDCA cycle was not fully documented in available data, limiting analysis of continuous improvement mechanisms. Additionally, the study relied on institutional documents and stakeholder perspectives without a longitudinal assessment of student outcomes.

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