

Implementation of Multi-Age Classes in Character Development of Students at Brainy Bunch International Islamic Montessori School Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The formation of students' character is the main goal of Islamic education. However, the learning practices in most schools still emphasize academic achievement more than the internalization of moral values. One of the pedagogical strategies that encourages the development of students' morals is the use of multi-age classrooms, which facilitate social interactions among students of different age levels within a single learning environment. The objective of this research is to analyze how multi-age classes are implemented at Brainy Bunch International Islamic Montessori School in Malaysia, as well as to explore how the dynamics of social interactions that occur in these classes contribute to the learning process and the internalization of students' moral values. This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive case study design. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation, and then analyzed using thematic analysis. The research results show that multi-age classrooms create a stable learning environment and encourage peer learning, collaboration, and mutual support in academic activities as well as daily routines such as communal worship and character development. This interaction serves as a social means for students to internalize their social awareness, empathy, and sense of responsibility. These findings affirm that multi-age classes not only serve as a learning strategy but also as a pedagogical space that integrates academic and moral dimensions in Islamic education.

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of education in the 21st century shows a shift in orientation that increasingly emphasizes character building and moral values as an integral part of learning objectives. (Adiputra & Hidayah, 2025). Education is no longer understood merely as a process of transmitting academic knowledge, but rather as a systematic effort to shape individuals who possess social responsibility, moral integrity, and the ability to interact ethically in community life. (Daryanto & Karim, 2017). Various contemporary educational studies emphasize that the success of modern education is greatly determined by the integration of moral and social values in the curriculum and daily learning practices, especially at the elementary education level. (Rahmadani & Fadilah, 2025; Rahmawati & Tanjung, 2025; Wulandari & Amalia, 2024). Thus, the orientation of education is no longer limited to literacy and numeracy, but also includes the affective and psychomotor dimensions as the foundation for character building. One of the pedagogical practices that has developed in response to this need is the implementation of multi-age classrooms, which involves grouping students of different ages and ability levels in one learning space to encourage collaboration, independent learning, and a supportive social environment. (Smit & Engeli, 2015). Multi-age classrooms encourage more natural and diverse social interactions, so students not only learn

academically but also experience social processes that resemble real life. Cross-age interactions provide space for social learning, empathy strengthening, and the habituation of responsibility through roles of mutual assistance and collaboration that occur continuously. (Tenenbaum et al., 2020). The multi-age classroom approach is also one of the main characteristics of the Montessori education model. In this study, the multi-age class being examined is at the elementary school level with an age range of approximately 7-9 years within one class. This age range was chosen because it is at a crucial phase of social-emotional development, where children begin to develop empathy, cooperation skills, and awareness of social norms. (Ainun et al., 2023). Therefore, cross-age interactions in multi-age classrooms become relevant to study as a pedagogical space that can provide opportunities for the natural occurrence of social learning processes. Academically, the urgency of this research lies in the effort to fill the gap in studies that still have limited scope in examining multi-age classrooms as a strategy for moral development in Islamic education, so this research is expected to provide conceptual and empirical contributions to the development of an integrative learning model between academic and moral aspects.

In the educational framework developed by Maria Montessori, multi-age classrooms are viewed as part of the concept of a prepared environment, which is a learning environment designed to encourage independence, exploration, and meaningful social interaction among students. (Lillard et al., 2017). Longitudinal research shows that students who learn in a Montessori environment with multi-age classrooms have better development in academic aspects, social skills, and self-regulation compared to students in conventional classrooms (Culclasure et al., 2018). Research conducted by Ansari, (2017) shows that the implementation of multi-age classes has a positive impact on students' academic development and learning motivation. In the study, multi-age classes are viewed as a learning strategy capable of increasing student engagement in the learning process through more varied interactions. However, the focus of this research is still limited to academic aspects and has not specifically examined the dimension of character formation or students' moral values. In line with that, the research Saqlain, (2015) also emphasizes that multi-age classrooms can enhance students' social skills, such as the ability to cooperate and communicate with others. However, this study places social interaction more as a means of developing general social skills, rather than as a mechanism that directly contributes to the internalization of moral or ethical values. However, from the perspective of Islamic education, the goal of education is not only oriented toward the mastery of knowledge but also toward the formation of morals and the personality of students through the process of habituation and social interaction within the educational environment (Yusof et al., 2018). Several studies in the field of Islamic education show that the character formation of students is greatly influenced by school culture, teacher role modeling practices, and social interactions that occur in the learning environment (Afriani & Yeli, 2026; Muhammad Rizki et al., 2025; Nuraeni & Labudasari, 2021). Research conducted by Halim, (2023) shows that the formation of students' character is greatly influenced by the school culture and the exemplary practices of teachers in the learning process. This research emphasizes the importance of a conducive educational environment in shaping student behavior. However, the approach used still focuses on the role of teachers and character education programs in general, without linking it to classroom structure as a factor influencing student social interactions. Furthermore, the research Warsah et al., (2024) revealing that the internalization of Islamic values in education is largely carried out through integration into the formal curriculum and structured learning activities. Although this research contributes to understanding the character education process in the Islamic context, the study has not specifically highlighted how the dynamics of social interaction within the classroom structure can serve as a mechanism in the formation of students' morals. Based on several previous studies, it can be concluded that earlier research tends to position multi-age classrooms as a pedagogical strategy impacting academic and

social aspects, and places character formation as a result of formal educational programs or interventions. Meanwhile, studies that specifically link the multi-age classroom structure with the process of internalizing moral values thru social interactions among students in Islamic education are still very limited.

To fill this gap, this research was conducted at Brainy Bunch International Islamic Montessori School, which is an international Islamic school in Malaysia that integrates the Montessori method with the Islamic curriculum and uses English as the primary medium of instruction. This school provides education from early childhood to middle school levels, including preschool, elementary school, and high school. At the elementary level, the multi-age classroom system is organized into two main groups, namely lower elementary and upper elementary. The lower elementary level consists of three age levels within one class, namely 7, 8, and 9 years old, while the upper elementary level includes students aged 10 to 12 years in a similar structure. This organization is designed to foster continuous cross-age interactions within the same learning community. In this school, multi-age classes are not only positioned as a pedagogical strategy but also as part of the school culture designed to habituate social interactions based on ethics. The classroom environment is designed so that students become accustomed to interacting, collaborating, and helping each other in both learning activities and daily routines. Thus, the educational process takes place in a holistic and contextual manner. Initial observations in the classroom indicate that the multi-age classes at Brainy Bunch present a unique social dynamic. In several situations, senior students were seen actively helping and guiding junior students, both in academic and non-academic activities. Conversely, junior students tended to imitate the behavior of senior students and developed attitudes of respect and positive dependence. These interactions demonstrate the potential for internalizing values of responsibility, care, and manners thru daily practices. However, multi-age classroom practices also present several challenges, such as differences in students' levels of independence, the need for intensive teacher support, and the potential for role imbalances in social interactions if not facilitated properly (Ronksley-Pavia et al., 2019). This condition shows that the effectiveness of multi-age classes highly depends on the quality of pedagogical management and school culture. Thus, this research is directed to examine the implementation of multi-age classrooms in the Islamic Montessori education environment at Brainy Bunch International Islamic Montessori School, to analyze the dynamics of social interactions that occur in multi-age classrooms, and to investigate how these interactions contribute to the learning process and the internalization of students' moral values. This research aims to analyze the implementation of multi-age classrooms in the Islamic Montessori education environment and to explore how the dynamics of social interactions in these classrooms contribute to the learning process and the internalization of students' moral values. This research is expected to contribute to the development of Islamic education studies by demonstrating that the structure of multi-age classrooms functions as social spaces that encourage the integration of academic learning, social interactions, and character formation in contemporary Islamic education.

2. METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive case study design. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to understand the meaning, process, and circumstances in depth from the participants' perspective (Sugiyono, 2023). The focus of the research is directed toward the exploration of social phenomena in a contextual and holistic manner within a bounded system. The case study design is used because this research intensively examines a specific educational institution in depth using multiple data sources, namely interviews, observations, and documentation (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The research was conducted at Brainy Bunch

International Islamic Montessori School, Malaysia. The selection of the location was conducted purposively with the consideration that this school has an organized and integrated multi-age class structure with Islamic values, making it relevant to the research focus. Data collection was conducted thru the direct involvement of the researcher, which took place from August 1 to August 28, 2025. Documentation is used to strengthen and confirm the findings from observations and interviews. The data sources in this study include primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained thru participatory observation of learning activities in multi-age classrooms and semi-structured interviews with the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Brainy Bunch and teachers directly involved in the implementation of the classroom system. Secondary data were obtained thru school documentation, such as learning guides, class activity records, and internal school policies related to the implementation of multi-age classrooms and moral education. Data analysis was conducted thematically by following the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014). The validity of the data is maintained thru source and technique triangulation, which involves comparing data from observations, interviews, and documentation to obtain a comprehensive and reliable picture (Flick, 2018). In addition, the researchers conducted repeated observations during the research period to ensure the stability of the observed interaction patterns. To minimize potential bias due to the researcher's position as a participant observer, systematic reflective recording was conducted throughout the research process. The process of clarifying findings to informants (member checking) was also conducted with two key informants, namely the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Brainy Bunch and the class teacher, to validate the researcher's main interpretations. By using this approach and method, this research can produce a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of multi-age classes in the character development of students at school. To clarify the research stages used, the research flow is presented in the following diagram:

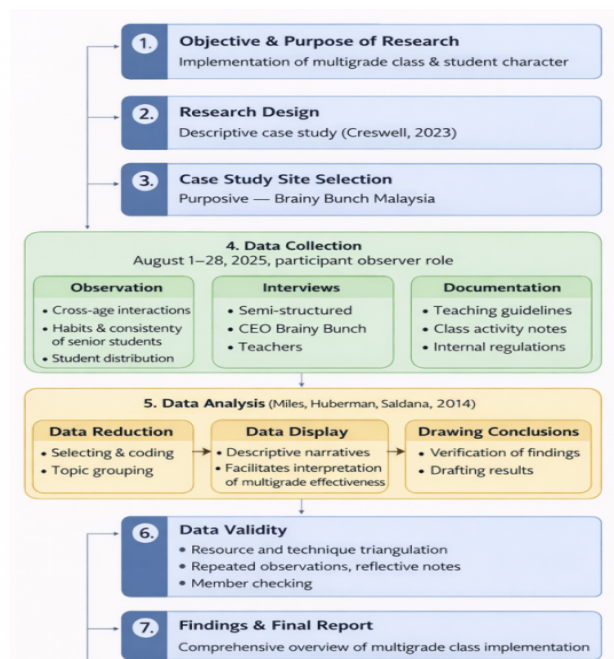


Figure 1. Research Method

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Implementation of the Multi-Age Classroom System at Brainy Bunch International Islamic Montessori School

Based on the observation results at the research location, Brainy Bunch International Islamic Montessori School offers three levels of education, namely preschool, elementary school, and high school. The focus of observation in this research is on the elementary level. At the elementary level, this school implements a multi-age classroom system as part of the Montessori approach combined with Islamic educational values. The class structure at this level is divided into two main tiers, namely Lower Elementary and Upper Elementary. In the Lower Elementary level, one class consists of students aged 7-9 years, and the Upper Elementary class is filled with students aged 10 to 12 years, with a total of around 20-25 students. This division is not only administrative but also affects the learning interaction patterns that develop at each level. The diverse age composition creates a relatively stable learning community. Students with different levels of development are in the same classroom environment for a relatively long learning period. This situation causes social interactions to occur repeatedly, both in academic activities and in daily school activities. Observations in the classroom show that the learning space is designed according to the characteristics of Montessori pedagogy. The classroom not only contains desks and chairs but also neatly arranged Montessori material shelves, individual work carpets, and several reflection corners used by students for independent learning. In some situations, students are seen moving relatively freely within the classroom to take learning materials or discuss in small groups, which often consist of students of different ages. The teacher's role in this situation is not always dominant at the front of the class. In some sessions, the teacher actually moves more frequently from one student to another to observe, then provides guidance as necessary. The diversity of ages in a single class creates a pattern of social interaction that is quite intense. Learning activities do not only take place thru teacher instructions, but also thru communication among students. The interaction is not limited to academic activities, but also appears in the daily routines of the school, such as congregational prayers, communal breakfast, and informal conversations in the classroom.

Daily learning activities begin with congregational Dhuha prayers in the mosque, followed by morning dhikr. The rows of prayer are not separated by age, so students from different levels stand in the same row. After that, the students return to the classroom to have breakfast together before starting their lessons. In the activity, informal interactions were observed, such as students helping their friends tidy up their eating area or communicating with friends of different ages. The results of the interview with the school management indicate that the multi-age classroom system is indeed designed to shape the character of the students. This was conveyed by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Brainy Bunch as follows: "From the beginning, we indeed wanted this school to be not just a place for academic learning, but a place for character building." The multi-age system is an important part of the Montessori approach that we use. We want children to grow in a community, not in rigid competition. With classes consisting of various ages, the atmosphere is more like a family. There are older siblings, there are younger siblings. Observation findings indicate that the interactions are not merely symbolic. In some situations, senior students were seen helping junior students, such as reminding them to line up properly, helping carry books, and tidying up learning tools without teacher instructions. This pattern creates a classroom atmosphere that tends to be cooperative. However, the implementation of multi-age classes also presents challenges in the differences in academic abilities among students, which require teachers to adjust their teaching methods. In some situations, younger students need more intensive support, while older students

sometimes show a decline in enthusiasm when frequently asked to help other students. To clarify the research findings related to the implementation of multi-age classes, the findings are presented in the following image:

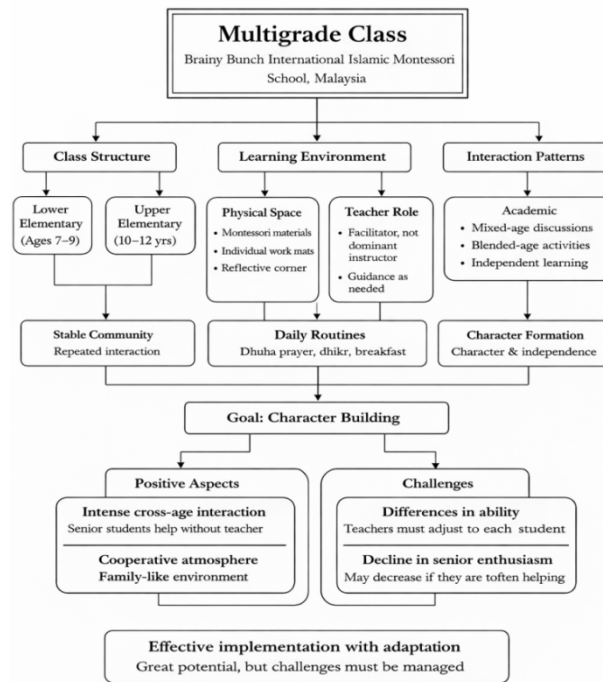


Figure 2. Implementation of multi-age classes at Brainy Bunch International Islamic Montessori School, Malaysia

The findings of this research indicate that multi-age classrooms function as social spaces that create opportunities for the formation of more collective learning communities. This pattern aligns with the concept in multiage education studies, which emphasize that cross-age grouping can provide a learning environment that is closer to natural social conditions compared to age-homogeneous classrooms (Ronksley-Pavia et al., 2019). In an environment like this, students not only learn cognitively but also thru social interactions and shared emotional experiences. From a Montessori perspective, age diversity is related to the concept of a prepared environment, which is an educational setting designed to encourage children's independence, collaboration, and social development (Astuti et al., 2023). Research conducted by Lillard et al., (2017) also shows that the diverse age composition in Montessori classes not only impacts academic achievement but also the development of students' social skills. In Islamic education, this condition is relevant to the view that character formation does not only occur thru the delivery of material in the classroom but also thru habituation in the social environment (Imroatus Sholihah & Mudhofar Mudhofar, 2025). Research conducted (Warsah et al., 2024) asserting that the social environment of education plays an important role in the process of internalizing moral values. Therefore, the multi-age classroom structure can be understood as a social space that allows modern pedagogical practices to interact with Islamic moral values in everyday life. Furthermore, the repeated cross-age interactions demonstrate a social learning process that allows students to learn thru direct experience. However, the challenges that arise in the implementation of multi-age classes indicate that the effectiveness of this system highly depends on the pedagogical competence of teachers in managing the differences in students' abilities. This is in line with research Ronksley-Pavia et al., (2019) which states that classes with a heterogeneous age composition require more complex pedagogical competencies compared to age-homogeneous classes.

a. Learning Strategies and Social Interaction Dynamics in Multi-Age Classes

The learning process in the multi-age class at Brainy Bunch shows a fairly flexible pattern and is not entirely teacher-centered. In several sessions, the teacher indeed begins the lesson with a brief explanation of the topic to be studied. Then, students are given the opportunity to explore the material thru discussions, group work, or independent learning using the Montessori materials available in the classroom. In that situation, the teacher's role resembles that of a facilitator who monitors students' learning progress rather than being the primary source of knowledge. This pattern makes the learning process feel less rigid, while also opening up space for students to adjust their own learning methods. From the observations made, such an approach indirectly opens up opportunities for differentiated learning within the same class. The differences are quite noticeable when students discuss the same topic. Younger students tend to still focus on understanding basic concepts, while older students are starting to be directed toward more applied discussions. In some discussions, older students seem to try to relate the material to everyday experiences, while younger students are still at the stage of understanding basic meanings. This difference in depth does not occur by chance, but is indeed part of the learning design in the multi-age classroom system. This was also confirmed thru an interview with the head of the Islamic religious education department who also serves as a class teacher at Brainy Bunch International Islamic Montessori School. The explanation aligns with classroom observations, where learning activities do not proceed uniformly but remain within the same thematic framework. Cross-age social interactions become a prominent aspect of the learning process. Younger students often observe the study methods of older students, while older students frequently take on the role of mentors within the group. In some situations, students who have grasped the material try to explain it back to their friends in simpler language. However, the dynamics of interaction do not always proceed without obstacles. In some group discussions, senior students tend to dominate the conversation, limiting the participation of junior students. Additionally, there are situations where senior students show a lack of patience in mentoring. In such conditions, the teacher intervened by giving quieter students a chance to speak and reminding everyone to ensure a more balanced interaction. To clarify the findings related to learning strategies and social interaction dynamics in a multi-age classroom, the findings are presented in the following image:

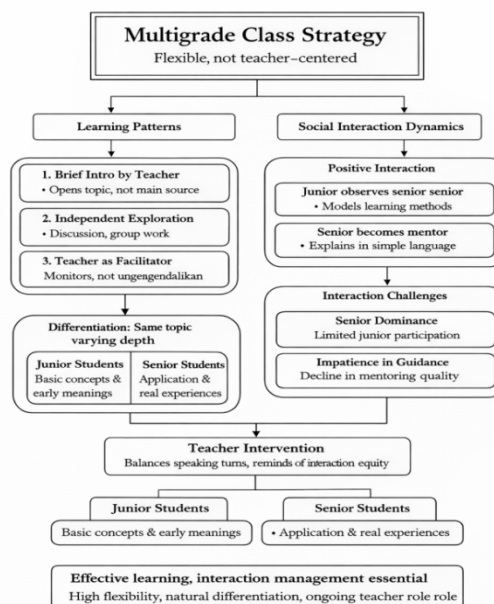


Figure 3. Learning Strategies and Social Interaction Dynamics in Multi-Age Classes

The findings indicate that flexible learning strategies enable differentiation within a multi-age classroom. This pattern aligns with the constructivist learning approach, which positions students as active subjects in the learning process. The observed discussion and group work activities also demonstrate the characteristics of collaborative learning. Research by Tamrongkunan & Tanitteerapan, (2020) stating that learning that provides space for discussion and group work can increase student engagement while also encouraging the development of higher-order thinking skills. The cross-age interactions that occur demonstrate the process of peer learning. This is in line with the findings Tenenbaum et al., (2020) which shows that peer interaction has a quite significant influence on cognitive and social development, especially in the context of discussion and collaborative work. However, the dynamics of unbalanced interactions indicate that learning in a multi-age classroom still requires effective pedagogical management. The role of the teacher as a facilitator is not limited to delivering material, but also includes managing social interactions so that all students can participate optimally. Thus, the effectiveness of a multi-age classroom highly depends on the teacher's ability to maintain interaction balance and manage the diversity of students' abilities.

b. Internalization of Moral Values in a Multi-Age Learning

Environment Cross-age interactions in the classroom not only impact the learning process but also relate to the emergence of behaviors that reflect moral values in students' daily lives. From classroom observations, these values do not always emerge thru formal material delivery, but are more often seen in daily activities that occur spontaneously. One of the behaviors that is quite often observed is the habit of mutual assistance among students. In some situations, students show initiative to help their friends without waiting for instructions from the teacher. For example, some immediately tidy up the learning tools after use, help fetch their friend's supplies, or explain the material again in a simpler way. These behavioral patterns appeared repeatedly in observations, so they did not seem like contrived actions, but rather had become part of the classroom habits. From several observed incidents, the junior students not only pay attention but also start to imitate the habits that are considered good. This is also evident in the worship practices that are part of the school routine. In one observation, an older student helped adjust the hand position of a younger classmate during prayer in a subtle manner without drawing the attention of other students. Interactions like this demonstrate a learning process thru exemplary behavior in real-life situations. Therefore, the role of the teacher remains evident in directing social interactions, for example, by providing gentle guidance, reminding students to speak politely, or modeling certain behaviors in everyday situations. To clarify the findings related to the internalization of moral values in a multi-age classroom learning environment, the findings are presented in the following image:

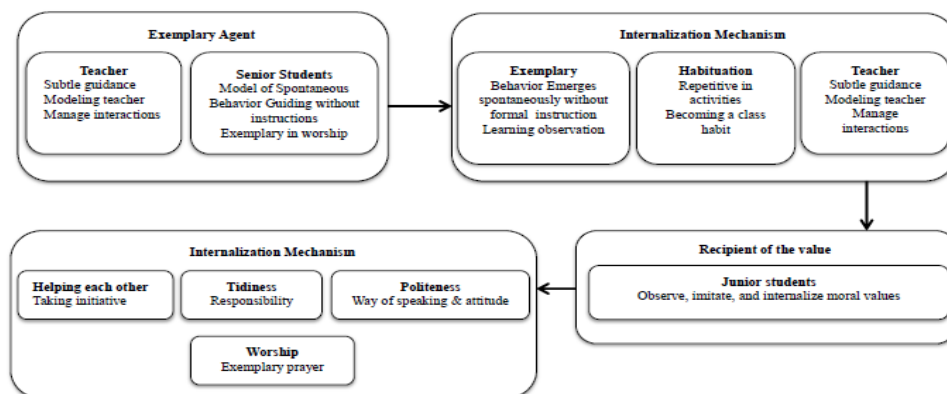


Figure 4. Internalization of Moral Values

The findings show that the internalization of moral values in multi-age classrooms occurs through social interactions that take place naturally. The pattern of interaction can be understood through the concept of peer modeling, which is the learning process that occurs through the observation of others' behavior. Within the framework of social learning theory developed by Albert Bandura, individuals tend to imitate behaviors they observe in their surroundings, especially when those behaviors are perceived as positive or receive favorable social responses (Amsari et al., 2024). In the context of a multi-age classroom, age diversity expands the opportunities for modeling processes, as students have more behavioral references that can be directly observed (Lillard et al., 2017). This strengthens the social learning process, which is not only cognitive but also affective and behavioral. From the perspective of Islamic education, such a process is related to the concept of ta'dib, which is the formation of manners through habituation and exemplary behavior. In his research, Yusof et al., (2018) explaining that moral education is not only conveyed through conceptual explanations but also through repeated social experiences in daily life. The multi-age classroom environment that allows for intensive and repeated interactions becomes a conducive space for that process. However, the potential for imitating negative behavior shows that the internalization of values does not occur automatically. The role of the teacher remains strong in directing the dynamics of interaction to stay within the expected value corridor. Teachers function not only as facilitators of learning but also as social controllers who maintain the quality of interactions among students.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, the implementation of multi-age classes at Brainy Bunch International Islamic Montessori School shows that this system not only functions as a grouping of students by age but also forms a dynamic learning community by combining students aged 7-9 and 10-12 years in one class. The structure encourages more flexible learning. The teacher acts as a facilitator, and the learning process takes place through a combination of independent, collaborative, and experiential activities. The dynamics of social interaction in a multi-age classroom reveal intense cross-age interaction patterns. Older students tend to take on the role of mentors, while younger students learn through observation and participation. This interaction occurs not only in academic activities but also in daily activities such as worship and classroom routines. However, these dynamics also present challenges, such as the dominance of certain students and the need for teachers to manage interactions more equitably. Moreover, cross-age interactions in multi-age classrooms contribute to the process of internalizing students' moral values. Values such as responsibility, empathy, and social concern develop through habituation and social experiences that occur repeatedly within the school environment. This shows that character formation does not only depend on the formal delivery of material but also on the quality of social interactions formed during the learning process. Thus, multi-age classrooms can be understood as both pedagogical and social spaces that support the integration of academic learning and character formation in Islamic education.

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