



MORAL DILEMMA DISCUSSION IN AKIDAH AKHLAK LEARNING: DEVELOPING ETHICAL REASONING AMONG MADRASAH TSANAWIYAH STUDENTS IN BUNGO

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ABSTRAK

Pembelajaran Akidah Akhlak di madrasah tsanawiyah (MTs) masih sering terjebak pada pendekatan normatif-kognitif yang menekankan hafalan dalil, sehingga kurang efektif dalam mengembangkan penalaran etis (ethical reasoning) siswa yang menghadapi persoalan moral yang kompleks di era digital. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis implementasi strategi Moral Dilemma Discussion (diskusi dilema moral) serta perubahan penalaran etis siswa yang menyertainya pada mata pelajaran Akidah Akhlak di MTs El Mahira Bungo, Jambi. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Subjek penelitian terdiri atas 30 siswa kelas VIII dan 2 guru Akidah Akhlak yang dipilih secara purposif. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipan, wawancara mendalam, dan analisis dokumen, kemudian dianalisis dengan model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña serta diuji keabsahannya melalui triangulasi sumber, triangulasi teknik, dan member checking. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa: (1) implementasi diskusi dilema moral berlangsung melalui empat tahap, yaitu penyajian kasus kontroversial, diskusi kelompok berbasis disonansi kognitif, klarifikasi nilai, dan refleksi integratif Islami; (2) analisis justifikasi lisan dan tertulis siswa berdasarkan tingkatan Kohlberg menunjukkan pergerakan dari penalaran konvensional yang berorientasi pada norma sosial dan rasa takut terhadap hukuman menuju penalaran bercirikan pascakonvensional yang bertumpu pada prinsip dan maqāṣid al-syarī'ah; dan (3) peran guru bertransformasi dari instruktur menjadi fasilitator yang memancing dialektika moral, dengan tantangan berupa dominasi siswa senior dan kesiapan guru menahan diri dari memberi jawaban. Secara teoretis, penelitian ini menawarkan model integratif yang menempatkan penalaran pascakonvensional dalam kerangka wahyu dan maqāṣid. Penelitian ini merekomendasikan integrasi psikologi moral Kohlberg dengan nilai-nilai tazkiyat al-nafs dalam kurikulum Akidah Akhlak agar lahir generasi yang tidak hanya taat secara ritual, tetapi juga kritis dan bijaksana secara etis.

ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Akidah Akhlak

Character Education

Ethical Reasoning

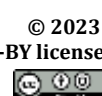
Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah

Moral Dilemma Discussion

Akidah Akhlak (Islamic creed and ethics) learning in Indonesian madrasah tsanawiyah (Islamic junior secondary schools) often remains confined to a normative-cognitive approach that emphasises the memorisation of scriptural proofs, which is of limited use in developing the ethical reasoning that students need to deal with complex moral problems in the digital era. This study aims to analyse the implementation of the Moral Dilemma Discussion strategy and the changes in students' ethical reasoning that accompanied it in Akidah Akhlak learning at MTs El Mahira Bungo, Jambi. The study adopted a qualitative approach with a case study design. The participants were 30 eighth-grade students and two Akidah Akhlak teachers selected purposively. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, analysed using the interactive

model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, and verified through source triangulation, technique triangulation, and member checking. The findings show that (1) Moral Dilemma Discussion was implemented in four stages: presentation of a controversial case, group discussion based on cognitive dissonance, value clarification, and integrative Islamic reflection; (2) analysis of students' written and oral justifications against Kohlberg's levels indicated movement from conventional reasoning, oriented towards social norms and fear of punishment, towards reasoning with post-conventional features grounded in principles and maqāṣid al-sharī'ah; and (3) the teacher's role was transformed from instructor to facilitator who provokes moral dialectics, although dominance by senior students and teachers' readiness to withhold answers remained challenges. The study recommends integrating Kohlberg's moral psychology with the values of tazkiyat al-naḥs in the Akidah Akhlak curriculum so as to nurture a generation that is not only ritually observant but also ethically critical and wise.

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1. Introduction

Character and moral education is a foundation of the Indonesian national education system and occupies a particularly central place in madrasahs. Within the madrasah curriculum, Akidah Akhlak (Islamic creed and ethics) is expected not only to transfer knowledge about the pillars of faith and praiseworthy conduct but also to transfer and inculcate values so that they shape students' attitudes and behaviour. Studies of Akidah Akhlak instruction confirm that the subject is effective when its content is connected to students' everyday conduct, teacher modelling, and contextual learning, yet they also report weak instructional strategies and the negative influence of digital media (Nurkholid & Anwar, 2026; Sayidah & Fatimah, 2025). In practice, Akidah Akhlak learning in many madrasah tsanawiyah (MTs) is still dominated by a textual, normative, and teacher-centred approach. Students are mainly required to memorise scriptural proofs (*dalīl naqlī*) about good and bad conduct without being equipped to reason about why an action is good or bad in complex present-day situations. A content analysis of Islamic Religious Education materials found that most units emphasise understanding social rules and their consequences, whereas reflection on moral dilemmas accounts for less than 1% of the content, so that the materials reinforce conventional moral compliance (Supriyanto & Al-Aqsha, 2026). Classroom studies point in the same direction: Akidah Akhlak teachers at a state MTs in Jambi still relied mainly on lectures, discussions, and question-and-answer sessions (Nurkholid & Anwar, 2026), and teachers at another MTs found it difficult to use varied methods when implementing a competency-based curriculum (Azizah et al., 2025).

This condition becomes a serious problem when students face the realities of the digital era. Phenomena such as cyberbullying, digital plagiarism, and permissive peer association require mature ethical reasoning, understood as the cognitive and affective

capacity to evaluate ambiguous moral situations, to consider multiple perspectives, and to decide on the basis of moral principles rather than external rules or social pressure alone. Adolescents now meet moral dilemmas both offline and on social media, and the dilemmas they encounter online are shaped by the specific dynamics of digital platforms (Rakinić, 2024). Digital media also increasingly mediate Islamic religious learning itself (Saidah et al., 2024). Students who rely only on memorised proofs often experience moral confusion when two good values conflict or when social norms collide with the principle of justice, a gap that Islamic education scholarship has linked to the need to connect moral psychology with Islamic ethics (Rahman & Khumainy, 2024).

Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development offers a relevant lens for analysing this problem because it locates morality in the reasoning behind an action rather than in the action alone. Moving students from pre-conventional reasoning (based on punishment and reward) towards post-conventional reasoning (based on universal principles) requires pedagogical interventions that provoke cognitive conflict. Moral dilemma discussion is the best-known strategy of this kind. Lind (2019) systematised it as the Konstanz Method of Dilemma Discussion, which treats moral competence as the ability to solve conflicts through deliberation based on moral principles. Recent studies report gains in moral competence after dilemma discussions in doctoral seminars (Jedličková, 2025), increases in moral reasoning among graduate students when discussion groups mixed different initial reasoning levels (Juujärvi & Myrsky, 2022), and perceived moral growth among medical students through contextualised cases and reflection (Pratomo et al., 2023). Neo-Kohlbergian research further shows that students' moral functioning involves sensitivity, reasoning, motivation, and character, and that emotions often shape decisions (van der Leij et al., 2021), while moral reasoning ability alone does not guarantee better decisions under acute social conflict (Zhang & Zhang, 2025).

In Islamic education, ethical reasoning cannot be separated from the faculties of reason (*'aql*) and the heart (*qalb*). Al-Ghazālī's tradition holds that noble character grows from inner struggle (*mujāhadah*) and critical contemplation (*tafakkur*) of the consequences of one's deeds, with purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) as the central educational goal (Intania et al., 2025; Khusnadin & Shihab, 2025). Islamic ethical reasoning is also oriented towards the higher objectives of the Sharia (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*), namely realising benefit (*maṣlaḥah*) and preventing harm (*mafsadah*) (Auda, 2021; Kamali, 2020). Comparative studies have argued that Kohlberg's emphasis on critical moral reasoning can complement the Islamic emphasis on habituation, character, and spiritual maturity found in Ibn Miskawayh and in the concept of *'āqil bāligh* (Ibad & Setiyorini, 2025; Lutfiyah & Muhid, 2025; Robbani & Munadi, 2026).

Although moral dilemma discussion has been widely studied in civic education and Western psychology, its integration into Akidah Akhlak learning remains limited. Yaqin (2021) developed a syntax of dilemma discussion for Akhlak learning, but the product was assessed only through expert validation. Maga et al. (2026) applied moral dilemma discussion in a classroom action research study at an MTs and reported gains in learning achievement scores, while other studies address character education at a macro level

(Ahmad & Bakri, 2025; Yakub et al., 2026). Few studies have examined how moral dilemmas are discussed within an Islamic epistemological framework and how this process shapes the ethical reasoning of MTs students, particularly in pesantren-based or integrated madrasahs. Three limitations of the existing literature can therefore be identified. First, the strongest evidence that dilemma discussion raises moral reasoning comes from university and professional education (Jedličková, 2025; Juujärvi & Myyry, 2022; Pratomo et al., 2023) rather than from early adolescents in religious schools. Second, studies that bring Kohlberg into dialogue with Islamic moral thought are largely conceptual or comparative (Ibad & Setiyorini, 2025; Lutfiyah & Muhid, 2025; Robbani & Munadi, 2026) and do not show how the two frameworks interact in students' actual reasoning. Third, Indonesian studies of dilemma discussion in Akidah Akhlak report expert validation or achievement scores (Maga et al., 2026; Yaqin, 2021) but not the justifications that students give. The present study addresses these gaps by examining students' reasoning as it unfolds in Akidah Akhlak classes.

MTs El Mahira Bungo, located in Bungo Regency, Jambi Province, integrates the national curriculum with a pesantren curriculum. Its students come from strong religious backgrounds but tend towards *taqlid* (following without critical reasoning) in matters of jurisprudence and ethics. An initial analysis of documents and interviews before the intervention supported this observation: about 75% of the students justified their moral positions by appeal to sin, punishment, or the approval of teachers and parents rather than to principles. This study therefore aims (1) to describe the implementation of the Moral Dilemma Discussion strategy in Akidah Akhlak learning at MTs El Mahira Bungo, (2) to analyse the shift in students' ethical reasoning before and after the dilemma discussion intervention, and (3) to formulate pedagogical implications for Akidah Akhlak teachers in developing ethical reasoning rooted in Islamic values. The study is thus primarily an exploration of how the strategy was implemented. Changes in students' ethical reasoning are examined qualitatively as part of that process, through the justifications that students gave during and after the discussions, rather than evaluated as a measured effect of the intervention. The unit of analysis is the reasoning that eighth-grade students articulate when they discuss moral dilemmas, together with the teachers' facilitation of that process. The novelty of the study lies in documenting how a Kohlbergian strategy is adapted to an Islamic pedagogical frame in which *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* and *tazkiyat al-nafs* serve as reference points for students' reasoning.

The article is organised as follows. The Method section describes the case study design, participants, data collection, and analysis. The Results and Discussion section presents the four-stage implementation, the shift in students' reasoning, the transformation of the teacher's role and classroom dynamics, and the pedagogical integration of moral psychology and *tazkiyat al-nafs*, each discussed against prior studies. The Conclusion answers the research questions and outlines recommendations and directions for further research.

2. Method

This study used a qualitative approach with a case study design to understand in depth the practice of Moral Dilemma Discussion in its natural context at MTs El Mahira Bungo (Yin, 2018). A qualitative approach was chosen because the study explores processes, meanings, and shifts in students' patterns of ethical reasoning that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2025). The study was conducted at MTs El Mahira Bungo, Bungo Regency, Jambi Province, over four months (March to June 2025). The site was selected because its integrated curriculum allows flexibility in innovating learning methods. The researchers were present in the classroom as participant observers throughout the observed sessions.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling and comprised two Akidah Akhlak teachers and 30 eighth-grade students aged 13 to 14 years. Eighth graders were chosen because early adolescence is a transition from concrete to formal thinking and thus a critical period for developing higher-order moral reasoning, a period that Islamic scholarship also associates with the onset of moral accountability (Robbani & Munadi, 2026). The data sources and collection techniques are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Data Sources And Collection Techniques

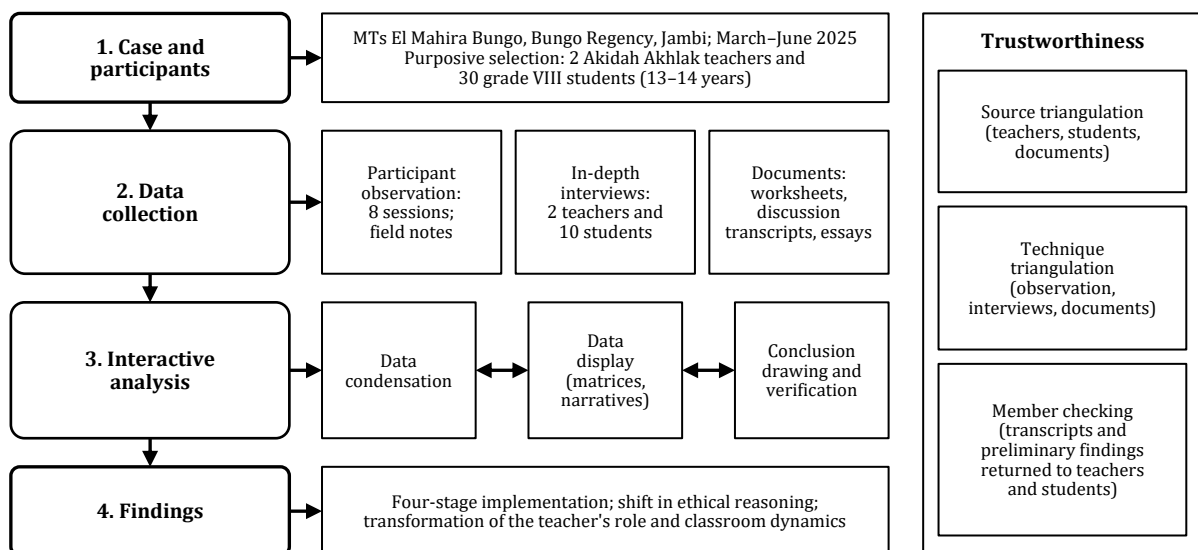
Technique	Participants or sources	Focus	Record produced
Participant observation	Eight Moral Dilemma Discussion sessions in the grade VIII Akidah Akhlak class	Discussion dynamics, students' responses, and teacher interventions	Field notes
In-depth interviews	Two Akidah Akhlak teachers; ten students selected randomly from different levels of academic ability	Teachers: pedagogy and challenges; students: cognitive and affective processes during discussion	Interview transcripts
Documentation	Student worksheets, transcripts of recorded discussions, and reflective essays written after the sessions	Students' written and oral justifications of their moral positions	Document corpus

Participant observation covered eight Moral Dilemma Discussion sessions, and field notes recorded discussion dynamics, students' responses, and teacher interventions. In-depth interviews were conducted with the teachers to explore their pedagogy and challenges, and with ten students selected randomly from different levels of academic ability to understand their cognitive and affective processes during the discussions. Documents included student worksheets, transcripts of recorded discussions, and reflective essays written after the sessions. The three techniques were used together to allow triangulation.

The selection of participants and the fieldwork procedures can be specified further. The two teachers were included because they taught Akidah Akhlak to the eighth-grade

class and designed and facilitated the dilemma discussions, and the 30 students were the members of the class in which the strategy was implemented. The ten student interviewees were drawn from different levels of academic ability so that the accounts of both higher- and lower-achieving students were represented. Fieldwork extended over four months, from March to June 2025, during which eight dilemma discussion sessions were observed. In each session, the researchers recorded in field notes the course of the four stages, the arguments that students advanced, and the questions and interventions of the teacher, while the discussions were recorded and later transcribed. Worksheets and reflective essays were collected after the sessions. The interviews, conducted during the implementation period, asked the teachers about their facilitation and its difficulties and asked the students how they had reasoned and felt during the discussions.

The data were analysed using the interactive model of Miles et al. (2020), as shown in Figure 1. Data condensation selected and focused the data relevant to ethical reasoning; data display organised them into matrices and logical narratives; and conclusion drawing and verification identified patterns in the shift of students' moral reasoning, which were interpreted with reference to Kohlberg's levels. In practice, the analysis focused less on the positions students chose than on the justifications they gave for them, for instance whether a position was defended by appeal to punishment and sin, to approval by teachers and parents, or to principles such as justice, rights, and the objectives of the Sharia. Statements from the three data sources were compared across sessions to trace how these justifications changed over time. Trustworthiness was established through source triangulation (teachers, students, and documents) and technique triangulation (observation, interviews, and documents). Member checking was conducted by returning transcripts and preliminary findings to the teachers and students to confirm the accuracy of the researchers' interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2025).



Qualitative case study · participant observation · interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña

Figure 1. Procedure Of The Qualitative Case Study

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the research data (2025).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Implementation of Moral Dilemma Discussion in Akidah Akhlak Learning

Observation and interview data show that Moral Dilemma Discussion at MTs El Mahira Bungo was not applied as a mechanical copy of a Western technique but was adapted into an Islamic pedagogical framework. The Akidah Akhlak teachers designed dilemma scenarios that were close to students' lives and relevant to the lesson content. For example, in the unit on honesty and trustworthiness (*jujur dan amanah*), the teacher did not begin with definitions but presented the following dilemma:

"Ahmad finds a wallet containing Rp 500,000 and an identity card near the school. At the same time, he knows that his best friend, Budi, is seriously ill and needs money for treatment, but Budi refuses to ask for help out of pride. Ahmad himself has only a very small amount of pocket money. Should Ahmad take the money in the wallet to help Budi without the owner's knowledge, or return it to the owner even though Budi will not be helped?"

The scenario illustrates three design features that recurred across the observed sessions. First, the dilemma was built around characters and situations that eighth graders could readily recognise, namely a friend in need, a modest amount of pocket money, and an object found near the school. Second, both options were defensible in terms of values already taught in the subject, so that neither could be dismissed simply by citing a rule. Third, the dilemma was tied to the lesson topic, which allowed the teacher to return to the intended content after the discussion instead of treating the dilemma as a separate activity.

The learning process was organised into four systematic stages, as summarised in Figure 2. In the first stage, presentation of the dilemma and orientation, the teacher presented the case and made sure that students understood the facts. Students were then asked to choose an initial position (A or B) and to stand on the side of the classroom that represented their choice. In the second stage, group discussion and cognitive dissonance, students discussed the case in mixed groups that combined supporters and opponents of each option. The teacher prompted them with Socratic questions such as, "If you take the money, is that honest? If you do not take it, are you being faithful (*amanah*) to your friend?" This stage triggered cognitive dissonance, as students realised that honesty and helping others are both important values that nevertheless conflict in this case.

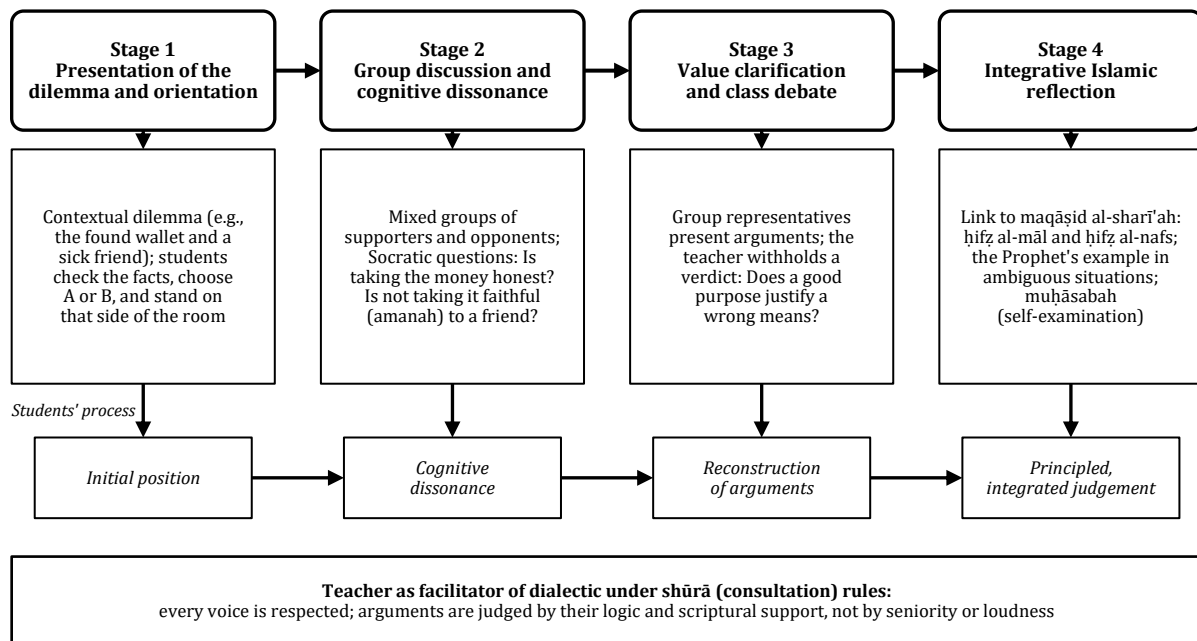


Figure 2. The four-stage Moral Dilemma Discussion procedure in Akidah Akhlak learning

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the research data (2025).

In the third stage, value clarification and class debate, group representatives presented their arguments. The teacher did not announce a right or wrong answer but challenged the arguments with questions such as, "Does a good purpose (helping Budi) justify a wrong means (taking another person's property)?" In the fourth stage, integrative Islamic reflection, the teacher related the discussion to *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, particularly the protection of property (*ḥifẓ al-māl*) and the protection of life (*ḥifẓ al-nafs*), and invited students to emulate the conduct of the Prophet Muhammad in facing ambiguous situations.

These four stages correspond closely to the logic of the Konstanz Method, in which a semi-real dilemma, an initial vote, and structured exchange between opposing camps are used to stimulate moral competence rather than to reach consensus (Lind, 2019). The use of mixed groups at MTs El Mahira Bungo is consistent with the finding of Juujärvi and Myyry (2022) that moral reasoning increased only in the condition where discussion groups deliberately combined students with different initial reasoning levels, so that participants were exposed to arguments above their own level. The teachers' Socratic prompts also reflect the facilitative role described by Keiša and Fernández González (2022), who found that teachers in Socratic conversations should give students space to form their own views and share their own opinions only afterwards. The second and third stages thus function as the engine of the strategy: a familiar value (honesty) is placed in tension with another legitimate value (helping a friend in need), and students must justify rather than merely state their position.

The case also shows how the strategy differs from earlier work in Islamic education. Yaqin (2021) formulated a syntax for dilemma discussion in Akhlak learning and validated it through expert judgement, and Maga et al. (2026) reported higher achievement scores after moral dilemma discussion in an MTs. The present study adds a classroom-level account of what happens in the reasoning process itself and shows that

the final stage, integrative Islamic reflection, is a deliberate addition that anchors the dilemma in *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*. In this respect, the implementation also resembles value clarification approaches in Islamic Religious Education that combine reflective discussion with explicit value awareness (Lutfiah et al., 2026). It is also consistent with the finding that structured moral argumentation helps adolescents become more aware of the values that are personally relevant to them, even when its effect on their relationship to the moral object is limited (van der Leij et al., 2024). The physical act of choosing a side of the room, the confrontation within mixed groups, and the teacher's refusal to settle the question prematurely together created the "productive discomfort" on which cognitive-developmental moral education depends.

3.2 The Shift in Students' Ethical Reasoning: From Conventional towards Post-conventional Reasoning

Analysis of documents and interviews shows a discernible shift in students' ethical reasoning. Before the intervention, most students (about 75%) reasoned at the pre-conventional and conventional levels. Their reasoning was dominated by fear of sin or punishment (Stage 1) or by the wish to be regarded as a "good child" and to obey teachers and parents (Stages 2 and 3). After a series of Moral Dilemma Discussion sessions, their reasoning began to change. Students started to move towards the post-conventional level, at which they were able to reason about morality on the basis of universal principles integrated with Islamic values. Table 2 contrasts the two patterns as they appeared in the data.

Table 2. Patterns of students' ethical reasoning before and after the dilemma discussions

Aspect	Before the intervention	After the series of discussions
Dominant level	Pre-conventional and conventional (about 75% of students)	Movement towards post-conventional reasoning
Basis of judgement	Fear of sin or punishment (Stage 1); wish to be seen as a "good child" and to obey teachers and parents (Stages 2 and 3)	Universal principles of justice and rights, integrated with Islamic values
Meaning of honesty	Honesty understood as "not lying"	Honesty understood as protecting the rights of others (<i>ḥifẓ al-māl</i>)
Handling conflicting values	Confusion when two good values conflict	Weighing <i>ḥifẓ al-māl</i> against <i>ḥifẓ al-nafs</i> and seeking a lawful alternative (e.g., raising funds or lending <i>ḥalāl</i> money)
Islamic reference	Memorised proofs and rulings	<i>Maqāṣid al-sharī'ah</i> , the prohibition of wronging others, <i>al-ḍarar yuzāl</i> ; benefit sought within <i>ḥudūd Allāh</i>

This shift is illustrated by an interview with one student, Rina (14 years old):

"I used to think that being honest just meant not lying. But when we discussed Ahmad's case, I got confused. It turns out that honesty is not only about words but about protecting other people's rights (ḥifẓ al-māl). If Ahmad takes the money, he helps Budi (ḥifẓ al-nafs), but he wrongs the owner of the wallet. In Islam, wronging others is a major sin. So Ahmad has to return the wallet, but he can find another way to help Budi, for example by raising

funds or lending him money that is ḥalāl. Good intentions must not use wrongful (bāṭil) means." (Interview, 15 May 2025)

Rina's statement displays features that Kohlberg's scheme associates with the post-conventional level, in which the principle of justice and basic rights, in this case the right to property, is understood as universal and cannot be violated for emotional or social reasons. She also integrated this reasoning with the Islamic prohibition of wronging others and with the legal maxim *al-ḍarar yuzāl* (harm must be removed). Importantly, her answer does not resolve the dilemma by sacrificing one value; it reconstructs the problem by searching for a lawful means of helping Budi. This is precisely the kind of reorganisation of moral judgement that dilemma discussion aims to stimulate.

Rina's own words also reveal the mechanism behind the shift. She reports first holding a simple rule ("honesty just means not lying"), then experiencing confusion during the discussion, and finally arriving at a broader understanding of honesty as respect for the rights of others. This sequence of an initial schema, disequilibrium, and reconstruction is the developmental pathway that cognitive-developmental theory attributes to cognitive conflict. The confusion she describes is not a failure of learning but evidence that the second stage of the procedure did its work, and the integrative reflection in the fourth stage gave her the conceptual resources of *maqāṣid* to resolve that confusion in a principled way.

This finding is consistent with research showing that dilemma discussion promotes higher-level moral reasoning. Juujärvi and Myyry (2022) reported increases in post-conventional reasoning indicators when participants were exposed to higher-level arguments, and Jedličková (2025) reported a 23% improvement in average moral competence scores among doctoral students after KMDD sessions. Pratomo et al. (2023) found that medical students perceived themselves as having reached a higher stage of moral development through contextual cases, multiple perspectives, and reflection, processes that they described in terms of assimilation and accommodation. The present case extends this evidence to early adolescents in an Islamic school. It also offers a contrast with the textbook analysis of Supriyanto and Al-Aqsha (2026), who found that Islamic Religious Education materials reinforce conventional compliance. When the same religious content is reframed as a dilemma, students can move beyond compliance towards principled reasoning.

The novelty of this case lies in what may be called an "epistemological leap". Students did not simply use Kohlberg's secular logic of justice; they placed it side by side with *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*. Students at MTs El Mahira Bungo learned that ethical reasoning in Islam is not merely a search for a middle way or compromise but a search for benefit (*maṣlaḥah*) that does not transgress the limits set by God (*ḥudūd Allāh*). This pattern supports the argument that *maqāṣid* can function as a methodology for ethical reasoning rather than as a list of legal categories (Auda, 2021; Kamali, 2020). It also parallels the finding of Irawan et al. (2024) that *maqāṣid* values in a pesantren curriculum were internalised through critical thinking training and moral development, and it resonates with the view of Islamic ethics as a philosophical framework for resolving conflicts (Asroni, 2026). In Rina's reasoning, *ḥifẓ al-māl* and *ḥifẓ al-nafs* became a structure for weighing competing goods rather than formulas to be memorised.

From a theoretical standpoint, the finding qualifies the assumption that post-conventional reasoning necessarily implies detachment from religious authority. Comparative studies have noted that Kohlberg grounds morality in human rationality and universal justice, whereas Islam grounds it in revelation (Lutfiyah & Muhid, 2025; Robbani & Munadi, 2026). The data suggest that, for these students, the two sources were

not experienced as rivals. Revelation provided the ultimate reference (the prohibition of wrongdoing and the protection of property and life), while reasoning provided the means of applying that reference to an unfamiliar situation. This supports the proposal that Kohlberg's focus on critical moral reasoning can be combined with Islamic traditions of character formation (Ibad & Setiyorini, 2025). It also accords with evidence from Indonesian secondary schools that moral reasoning, religiosity, and internalised values are jointly related to students' prosocial behaviour (Yusoff et al., 2022).

The compatibility between the two frameworks should not, however, be overstated. At its highest stages, Kohlberg's scheme locates moral authority in autonomous reason and in principles that any rational person would choose, whereas Islamic ethics treats revelation as the final source of moral norms and regards reason (*'aql*) as the faculty that understands and applies them (Lutfiyah & Muhid, 2025; Robbani & Munadi, 2026). The scheme also places obedience to rules and authority at lower stages of development, while in Islamic moral education adherence to legitimate norms and to the guidance of teachers is a virtue rather than a sign of immaturity, and moral maturity in the Ghazalian tradition is judged by sincerity, self-discipline, and the unity of knowledge and action as much as by the quality of argument (Intania et al., 2025; Khusnadin & Shihab, 2025). Rina's answer illustrates the difficulty of mapping one framework onto the other. She appealed to the rights of the wallet's owner, which Kohlberg's scheme associates with principled reasoning, but she also invoked the gravity of sin, which the same scheme would assign to its lowest stage. In this study, therefore, the label "post-conventional" is used only to describe the structure of students' justifications, namely reasoning that weighs competing principles rather than repeating a rule. It is not taken as a measure of Islamic ethical maturity, which would require evidence of students' sincerity, conduct, and spiritual discipline that a classroom case study of reasoning cannot provide. This position is consistent with calls to read moral psychology in dialogue with Islamic ethics rather than in isolation from it (Rahman & Khumainy, 2024).

At the same time, the shift should be interpreted with caution. The stage attributions were based on qualitative analysis of interviews, worksheets, discussion transcripts, and reflective essays rather than on a standardised instrument, and the source data do not provide a post-intervention distribution comparable to the initial estimate of 75%. Neo-Kohlbergian research also warns that reasoning, emotion, and action do not always align (van der Leij et al., 2021) and that higher moral reasoning does not necessarily improve decisions under acute social pressure (Zhang & Zhang, 2025). The present findings are therefore best read as evidence of a change in the quality of students' moral argumentation, which is a necessary but not sufficient condition for change in moral behaviour.

3.3 Transformation of the Teacher's Role and Classroom Dynamics

The implementation of the strategy required a transformation in the teacher's role. The Akidah Akhlak teachers at MTs El Mahira Bungo no longer positioned themselves as the "source of absolute truth" (the sage on the stage) but as "facilitators of dialectic" (the guide on the side). One of the participating teachers, Ustaz Ahmad, explained:

"The hardest challenge for me was holding myself back from immediately telling them the right answer. At the beginning, I was used to correcting students' arguments right away when they were wrong according to fiqh. But with this method, I learned to let them

'suffer' cognitively for a while and let them debate, and only then do I straighten things out with the appropriate proofs. As a result, they remember better and understand the essence, rather than merely memorising rulings." (Interview, 20 May 2025)

The classroom dynamics also changed from passive to highly active and egalitarian. Students who were usually quiet began to express their opinions because a moral dilemma has no single "correct" answer. Challenges nevertheless remained. Some students accustomed to patriarchal or authoritarian patterns in the dormitory environment at times dominated the discussions. The teachers had to manage the class firmly by applying democratic rules of *shūrā* (consultation), under which every voice was respected and arguments were judged by the strength of their logic and scriptural support rather than by who spoke loudest or who was most senior. Table 3 summarises these changes.

Table 3. Transformation of the teacher's role and classroom dynamics

Aspect	Conventional practice	During Moral Dilemma Discussion
Position of the teacher	Source of absolute truth ("sage on the stage")	Facilitator of dialectic ("guide on the side")
Response to students' arguments	Immediate correction of arguments considered wrong according to <i>fiqh</i>	Students debate first; the teacher then clarifies with the appropriate proofs
Learning emphasis	Memorising rulings	Remembering and understanding the essence of the value
Student participation	Passive	Active and egalitarian; usually quiet students begin to express opinions
Emerging challenge	–	Dominance by students accustomed to patriarchal or authoritarian patterns in the dormitory, or by senior students
Teacher's response	–	Firm class management through democratic <i>shūrā</i> rules: every voice respected; arguments judged by logic and scriptural proof

The participation of usually quiet students deserves particular attention. In a conventional Akidah Akhlak lesson, the existence of one authoritative answer tends to privilege students who memorise well and to silence those who fear being wrong. Because a dilemma deliberately lacks a single correct answer, the risk of speaking was lowered and the value of a contribution came to depend on the quality of its reasoning. This change in the classroom's rules of recognition is arguably as important as the change in students' reasoning, since moral development through discussion presupposes that students actually voice and test their arguments.

Ustaz Ahmad's account mirrors the conclusion of Keiša and Fernández González (2022) that facilitating Socratic moral conversation is more demanding than traditional teaching because it requires tolerance for uncertainty and restraint in sharing one's own views. His sequence of allowing debate first and then "straightening things out with the appropriate proofs" is significant. It shows that the teacher did not abandon normative guidance but delayed it until students had worked through the problem, so that the scriptural proof arrived as an answer to a question that students had come to feel

themselves. This sequencing addresses a concern raised in studies of Akidah Akhlak instruction, which recommend positioning teachers as facilitators of character development and updating teaching methods (Sayidah & Fatimah, 2025).

The transformation was not automatic. Azizah et al. (2025) found that teachers at an MTs struggled to use varied methods when implementing a competency-based curriculum, and Nurkholiq and Anwar (2026) reported that Akidah Akhlak teachers in Jambi still relied mainly on lectures, discussions, and question-and-answer sessions while facing limited digital teaching competence. Against this background, the experience at MTs El Mahira Bungo shows that the shift from instructor to facilitator depends on teachers' readiness to face critical arguments from students and on their mastery of discussion facilitation. Professional development that combines different educational traditions may support this readiness, although Sinaga et al. (2026) found that the affective dimension of a cross-tradition model showed minimal gains compared with its cognitive dimension, which suggests that teachers' dispositions require deliberate attention.

The dominance of senior or more assertive students is a specific challenge in pesantren-based madrasahs, where dormitory life can reproduce hierarchical relationships. Irawan et al. (2024) similarly noted limited student participation in decision-making and tensions between discipline and individual freedom in a pesantren that applied *maqāṣid*-based human rights education. The use of *shūrā* rules at MTs El Mahira Bungo offers a culturally grounded response: it legitimises equal participation through an Islamic concept rather than through an imported notion of classroom democracy. This aligns with findings that a positive madrasah climate, built through teacher modelling and value-based learning across subjects, strengthens character formation (Yakub et al., 2026), and with Lind's (2019) emphasis on rules of discussion that protect the speaker and focus attention on arguments rather than on persons.

3.4 Pedagogical Implications: Integrating Moral Psychology and Tazkiyat al-Nafs

The findings underline the importance of integrating Kohlberg's moral psychology with the Islamic concept of *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul). Kohlberg focuses on the cognitive aspect of morality, namely reasoning, whereas Islam emphasises a balance between reason (*'aql*), the heart (*qalb*), and action (*'amal*). In Akidah Akhlak learning at MTs El Mahira Bungo, Moral Dilemma Discussion did not stop at logical debate. In the reflection stage, the teacher invited students to engage in *muḥāsabah* (self-examination). Students were encouraged to recognise that the ability to reason through a complex moral dilemma reflects purity of heart and sharpness of conscience. If the heart is clouded by base desires, ethical reasoning is easily bent to justify wrong actions, a process that can be described as the rationalisation of sin. Ethical reasoning must therefore be accompanied by *mujāhadat al-nafs* (struggle against the lower self). Figure 3 presents the integrated model derived from these findings.

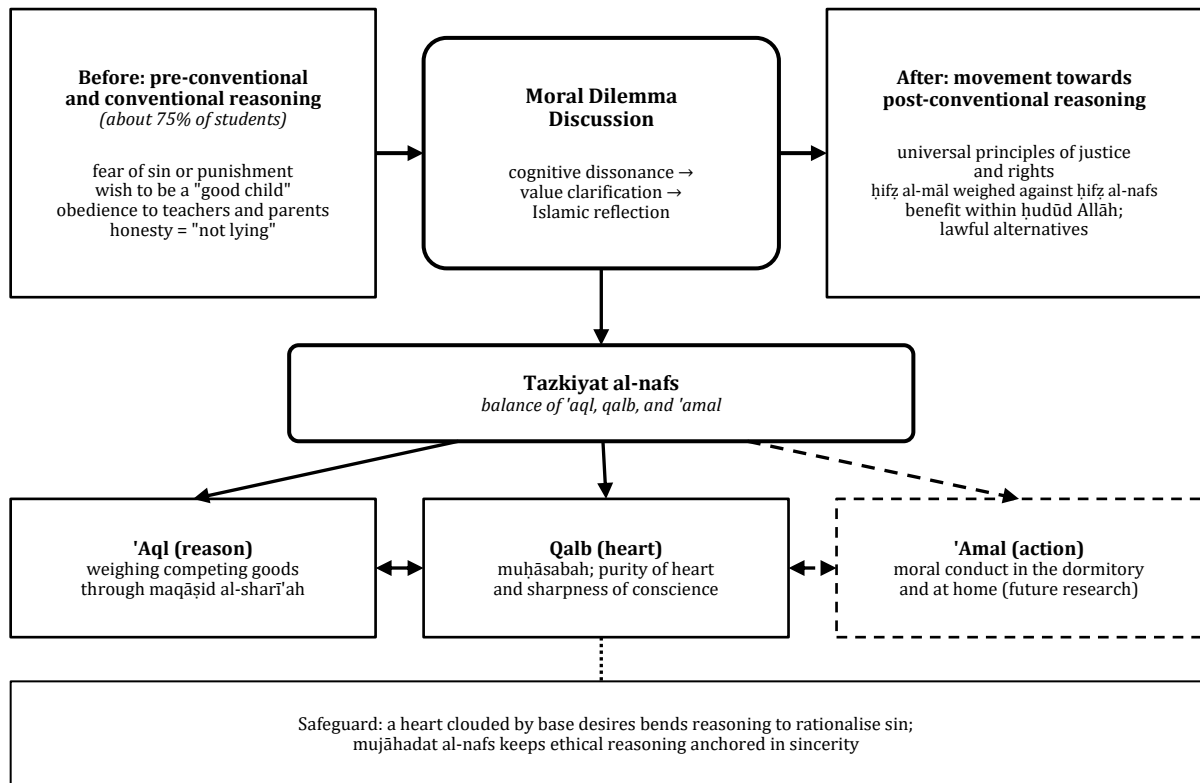


Figure 3. Integrated model of the shift in ethical reasoning: Moral Dilemma Discussion, *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, and *tazkiyat al-nafs*

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the research data (2025).

This integration makes Akidah Akhlak learning not only sharpen students' moral thinking but also soften their hearts, in line with the well-known Prophetic tradition that the Prophet was sent to perfect noble character. The model resonates with several strands of recent scholarship. Khusnadin and Shihab (2025) argue that al-Ghazālī's *tazkiyat al-nafs*, with its stages of purging, cultivating, and illumination, can serve as a method of moral education integrated across subjects. Nazarudin and Mukarom (2026) identify character education, habituation, exemplary conduct, and purification of the soul as pathways of moral internalisation for addressing moral crisis, and Intania et al. (2025) describe the integration of reason, revelation, and *tazkiyat al-nafs* as the core of al-Ghazālī's educational thought in Indonesian pesantren. Fatmawati et al. (2026) likewise show that al-Ghazālī's notions of sincerity and spiritual discipline remain relevant to contemporary religious learning. What the present study adds is a classroom procedure in which these ideals are placed after a cognitively demanding dilemma, so that *muḥāsabah* operates on reasoning that students have just produced rather than on abstract exhortation.

The integration also responds to a limitation of purely cognitive approaches. The neo-Kohlbergian finding that emotions such as compassion and guilt often decide students' moral choices (van der Leij et al., 2021) suggests that reasoning needs to be connected to the affective and volitional sides of the person. In the Islamic frame used at MTs El Mahira Bungo, this connection is provided by the heart and by self-discipline. Reflective practices such as structured *muḥāsabah* have been associated with

improvements in students' religious attitudes (Amanda et al., 2026), and the implementation of *tazkiyat al-nafs* has been proposed as a framework for developing student character (Ibrahim et al., 2025). Programmes that require students to act on values, such as da'wah outreach that instilled honesty, discipline, responsibility, and compassion among female santri (Ummah et al., 2025), indicate how classroom reasoning might be extended into practice. Self-efficacy has also been identified as a factor in the formation of students' religious character in transformational Islamic Religious Education (Husniah et al., 2025).

For teachers and curriculum developers, three practical implications follow. First, dilemma scenarios should be built into Akidah Akhlak teaching materials as core content rather than as supplementary activities, which would correct the scarcity of dilemma reflection identified in current materials (Supriyanto & Al-Aqsha, 2026). Second, the reflective stage should explicitly connect *maqāṣid* reasoning with *muḥāsabah*, so that students learn both to weigh competing goods and to examine their own motives. Third, scenarios should draw on students' digital and social realities, such as online harassment or academic dishonesty, given that adolescents increasingly face dilemmas in online environments (Rakinić, 2024) and that Islamic education must respond to digital culture (Saidah et al., 2024). These implications are consistent with theoretical analyses that position Islamic Religious Education as a vehicle for character building (Ahmad & Bakri, 2025), with reviews that integrate Qur'anic values into developmental psychology (Syahmil & Sa-U, 2024), and with bibliometric evidence that pedagogical research in Islamic education increasingly addresses character education (Ni'mah et al., 2023).

3.5 Theoretical Contribution and Limitations

Theoretically, this study contributes an integrated model in which a Kohlbergian strategy for stimulating cognitive conflict is embedded in an Islamic pedagogical frame. The model modifies the conventional reading of Kohlberg in two ways. First, it treats post-conventional reasoning in an Islamic setting not as independence from revelation but as the ability to apply revealed principles, interpreted through *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, to new and conflicting situations. Second, it adds a reflective and purificatory component (*tazkiyat al-nafs* and *muḥāsabah*) that addresses the gap between moral reasoning and moral motivation noted in neo-Kohlbergian research. In this respect, the study supports comparative and conceptual proposals to combine Kohlberg with Islamic moral thought (Ibad & Setiyorini, 2025; Lutfiyah & Muhid, 2025; Rahman & Khumainy, 2024) and provides classroom evidence for them. It also complements studies of value internalisation in Indonesian Islamic schools that emphasise role modelling, monitoring, explanation, and storytelling (Syihabuddin, 2022) by showing that structured disagreement can be an equally legitimate route to internalisation.

Practically, the study offers madrasah teachers a replicable sequence that can be adapted to other Akidah Akhlak topics. The sequence begins with a contextual dilemma and a visible choice of position, continues with mixed-group discussion guided by Socratic questions, proceeds to a class debate in which the teacher withholds a verdict, and ends with reflection that links the discussion to *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, the example of

the Prophet, and *muḥāsabah*. Because the sequence relies on ordinary classroom resources rather than on technology or special materials, it is feasible for madrasahs with limited facilities, a constraint that has been reported for Akidah Akhlak teaching in Jambi (Nurkholiq & Anwar, 2026). Its main requirement is a change in teachers' professional stance, which points to the importance of teacher training that combines facilitation skills with knowledge of moral development and of Islamic ethical reasoning.

The study has limitations. It is a single case study in one integrated madrasah, and its findings cannot be generalised statistically to other MTs. The identification of reasoning stages relied on qualitative interpretation rather than on standardised measures of moral judgement, and the study did not observe students' moral behaviour outside the classroom, in the dormitory, or at home. Kohlberg-based research in Indonesian junior high schools has shown that contextual, project-based approaches can connect moral theory with practice (Ngangi et al., 2024), and future studies could combine dilemma discussion with such approaches to observe whether changes in reasoning are carried into action.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that Moral Dilemma Discussion can be a relevant and promising strategy for Akidah Akhlak learning at MTs El Mahira Bungo. In answer to the research questions, (1) the strategy was implemented in four stages, namely presentation of a dilemma, group discussion based on cognitive dissonance, value clarification and class debate, and integrative Islamic reflection, and this sequence triggered cognitive dissonance and encouraged students to reconstruct their moral thinking; (2) students' justifications showed movement from rigid and normative conventional reasoning, oriented towards social norms and fear of punishment, towards more critical and flexible reasoning with post-conventional features, oriented towards principles and *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*; and (3) the teacher's role was transformed from instructor to facilitator of dialectic, which appeared to be central to the implementation, although it was accompanied by challenges of classroom management, the dominance of senior students, and the need for teachers' readiness to face students' critical arguments.

Theoretically, the study shows that post-conventional reasoning in an Islamic setting can take the form of applying revealed principles, interpreted through *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, to conflicting situations, and that this reasoning is best accompanied by *muḥāsabah* and *mujāhadat al-nafs* so that reason is not used to rationalise wrongdoing. The main contribution of the study is a classroom procedure, ending in integrative Islamic reflection, through which a Kohlbergian strategy can be used in Akidah Akhlak without treating Kohlberg's stages as the measure of Islamic ethical maturity. The study recommends that madrasahs and curriculum developers integrate moral dilemma scenarios into Akidah Akhlak textbooks as core content rather than as supplements, and that teachers receive continuous training in discussion facilitation and the psychology of moral development so that they do not fall back on doctrinal teaching. Such training should give teachers opportunities to experience dilemma discussion as participants before facilitating it. These conclusions are drawn from one class in a single integrated

madrasah and from eight observed sessions, and they concern the quality of students' moral argumentation during the intervention. Whether these changes persist and translate into lasting moral character cannot be established from the present data, and the recommendations should be adapted to the resources, teacher capacity, and institutional culture of other madrasahs. Future research should use quantitative, mixed-methods, or longitudinal designs with larger samples across different MTs to test the generalisability of the integrated model of Kohlberg's theory and *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, and should examine its effects on students' moral behaviour outside the classroom, including in dormitories and at home.

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