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Hidden Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education: Production of Values and Social Piety in Islamic Schools

Mohammmad Hasan[1], Nor Hasan, [2] Mohammad Muchlis Solichin [3], Siswanto [4]

[1, 2, 3, 4] *Universitas Islam Negeri Madura, Indonesia*

muchlisfiqhan@gmail.com
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Abstract. *This study examines the hidden curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI/IRE) in Islamic schools and its contribution to value production and the formation of students' social piety. Employing a qualitative approach with a multiple case study design, the research was conducted in three Islamic Senior High Schools in East Java, Indonesia, over ten months. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with IRE teachers, school principals, students, and parents, and documentary analysis. Findings reveal that the hidden curriculum operates through three primary channels: classroom climate and daily ritual routines, relational expectations between teachers and students, and the symbolic dimensions of the school's physical space. These channels collectively produce value dispositions — honesty, social care, collective responsibility, and empathy — that extend substantially beyond formal learning outcomes. This article argues that social piety, understood as a religious orientation expressed through ethical and just social action, is the primary product of an effective IRE hidden curriculum. Theoretical and practical implications for IRE curriculum development and Islamic educational policy are critically discussed.*

Keywords : *Hidden curriculum; Islamic religious education; social piety; value production; Islamic school*

INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (IRE), known in Indonesia as Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI), occupies a strategic position in the national education system. As a compulsory subject across all levels of formal schooling, IRE serves not merely as a vehicle for the transmission of religious knowledge but as a primary arena for the formation of character, moral identity, and Islamic selfhood among the younger generation (Azra, 2012; Muhaimin, 2004). Yet a fundamental question persistently eludes scholarly attention: are the most consequential

Islamic values in students' lives exclusively the product of explicit instruction through the formal curriculum, or are they more extensively shaped by unwritten, unacknowledged, yet deeply formative, educational forces?

This question directs our inquiry toward the concept of the hidden curriculum, the dimension of schooling not inscribed in official curriculum documents, yet demonstrably constitutive of students' knowledge, attitudes, values, and dispositions (Jackson, 1968; Giroux & Penna, 1979; Margolis, 2001). Unlike the formal curriculum, which is auditable and explicitly evaluated, the hidden curriculum operates through daily routines, relational interactions, unstated expectations, spatial arrangements, and institutional symbolism — collectively delivering "lessons" that are frequently more powerful and more durable than those explicitly taught.

In the context of Islamic schools, the hidden curriculum assumes dimensions that are distinctively indeed, uniquel charged. Islamic schools in Indonesia, whether madrasah under the auspices of the Ministry of Religious Affairs or general schools with an Islamic identity under the Ministry of Education, operate within a normative horizon of Islamic values that permeates the entire institutional ecology: from architectural design and classroom decoration, to the practice of congregational prayer and morning Quranic recitation, to the manner in which teachers address students and manage social conflict. This entire ecology constitutes a potentially rich medium of hidden curriculum for the formation of values and social piety.

Social piety which we define as a religious orientation that manifests itself in ethical, just, and humanizing social action is the central concept of this article. Distinct from ritual piety, which focuses on the performance of formal acts of worship (ibadah mahdhah), social piety emphasizes the quality of relationships between human beings (hablun minannas) as an authentic expression of faith (Nata, 2012; Mas'ud, 2002). Our central argument is that the hidden curriculum within IRE learning constitutes the primary mechanism through which social piety is produced and reproduced in students, often far exceeding what can be achieved through formal instruction alone.

Research on the hidden curriculum in Indonesian Islamic education remains limited. The majority of IRE curriculum studies have focused on formal dimensions: analysis of content standards, syllabus design, teaching methods, and measurable cognitive-affective learning outcomes (Majid & Andayani, 2004; Tafsir, 2008). Studies that position the hidden

curriculum as a primary analytical object in the context of IRE and Indonesian Islamic schools are rare, and virtually none specifically links the hidden curriculum to the production of social piety. This article seeks to fill that gap.

METHOD

Literatur Review

The concept of the hidden curriculum was first systematically articulated by Philip Jackson in his landmark work Life in Classrooms (1968). Observing the daily lives of elementary school children, Jackson identified three structural realities of classroom existence crowds, praise, and power that transmitted lessons quite independent of academic content: lessons about compliance, evaluation, and the management of institutional authority. These lessons, Jackson argued, were no less educationally consequential than the formal curriculum; indeed, the facility with which students learned to navigate the hidden curriculum was a primary predictor of their institutional success.

The critical tradition subsequently developed this concept along explicitly political lines. Giroux and Penna (1979) demonstrated that the hidden curriculum functions to reproduce class relations and dominant ideology: through unmarked routines and norms, schools teach students to accept social hierarchies as natural. Apple (1979), in Ideology and Curriculum, argued that the hidden curriculum transmits "legitimate" knowledge reflecting the interests of dominant social groups, making schooling a central arena of ideological reproduction. From this perspective, the hidden curriculum is not politically neutral; it is a contested site through which power relations are naturalized or, potentially, challenged. (Apple, Michael W, 1979; Apple, Michael W., 1979)

However, the critical perspective should not be read as a wholesale negation of the emancipatory potential of the hidden curriculum. Bernstein (1975) demonstrated that the pedagogical codes embedded in classroom practice can distribute or distort learning opportunities differently across social contexts. In schools with a strong and coherent institutional ethos such as Islamic schools the hidden curriculum holds the potential to become a far more effective vehicle for value formation than explicit moral instruction, precisely because it operates at the level of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977): dispositions internalized

through repeated practice, rather than merely propositions memorized for examination.(Zaenal Abidin et. All, 2024; Eka Rizki Amalia, 2025; Najib Habibi & 2025).

Islamic schools in Indonesia operate within a distinctive value ecology. Unlike general public schools grounded in relatively religiously neutral civic-national values, Islamic schools explicitly position Islam as the normative horizon that underlies all institutional practices. This means that the hidden curriculum in Islamic schools operates in a context where religious values are not merely subject matter content but the interpretive framework for all social interaction within the school. (Zahrotus Saidah, 2023; Saidah, Z., 2023).

This phenomenon as the "Islamization of the school atmosphere", a process through which Islamic values permeate all dimensions of institutional life through ritual, aesthetics, codes of conduct, and relational interaction. From the perspective of the sociology of education, this atmosphere is the primary medium of the hidden curriculum: it shapes students' Islamic habitus not primarily through doctrinal propositions but through daily practical engagement in a sacralized value ecology.

Mas'ud (2002) advocates "religious humanism" as an alternative to a model of Islamic education excessively oriented toward ritual formalism and rote memorization. Within the framework of religious humanism, the ultimate aim of Islamic education is the formation of the socially pious human being one who understands worship not as private ritual alone, but as motivation for active engagement in the life of community and society. The hidden curriculum of Islamic schools, in this perspective, is the mechanism through which religious humanism is transformed from normative discourse into living dispositions. (Alhamuddin & Hamdani, F. F. R. S. 2018,. Halid, A. 2019).

The concept of social piety deployed in this article is constructed at the intersection of several scholarly traditions. In the Islamic tradition, social piety is rooted in the concept of al-akhlaq al-karimah (noble moral character) in its social dimension, and in foundational principles including ukhuwah (brotherhood), ta'awun (mutual assistance), 'adl (justice), and rahmah (compassion) (Al-Ghazali, n.d.; Ibn Khaldun, 1958). Social piety is an expression of faith verified not in individual ritual observance but in the quality of one's relationships with fellow human beings. (Halid, A. 2019 : Saidah, Z., Syathori, A., & Badriyah, Y. (2023).

In contemporary sociology of religion, this concept resonates with what Wuthnow (1991) calls "acts of compassion" expressions of religiosity that manifest as active concern for the suffering of others. Habermas's (1984) theory of communicative action provides a relevant

philosophical framework: social piety may be understood as an action orientation grounded in solidarity and mutual recognition, rather than instrumental calculation.

For the purposes of this research, we operationalize social piety into four observable dimensions: (1) an orientation toward empathy and care for the needs of others; (2) commitment to honesty and integrity in social interaction; (3) awareness of collective responsibility and engagement in community life; and (4) sensitivety to injustice and a disposition to respond to it actively and constructively. (Rachmayanti, A. C. 2025, Seleim, A., & Bontis, N. 2009).

Research Location

This study employs a qualitative approach with a multiple case study design, following the methodological framework established by Yin (2018). The choice of qualitative methodology is epistemologically motivated: the hidden curriculum, as an object of scholarly inquiry, cannot be accessed through standard measurement instruments because it operates below the surface of explicit discourse and can be adequately understood only through interpretive engagement with the meanings constructed by social actors.

Research was conducted at three Islamic Senior High Schools (SMA Islam) in East Java, selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) a strong and explicitly articulated Islamic institutional identity; (2) an IRE program with a minimum operational history of ten years; (3) location within socially and demographically diverse community contexts; and (4) institutional willingness to grant the researcher access for sustained participant observation. The three schools anonymized as SMA Islam Al-Hikmah, SMA Islam Al-Falah, and SMA Islam Darussalam represent variation in Islamic orientation (modernist, traditionalist, and integrative) and in socio-economic context.

Data were generated through three complementary methods. First, intensive participant observation over ten months encompassed classroom IRE learning sessions, congregational prayer and daily Islamic ritual activities, teacher-student interactions inside and outside the classroom, informal spaces including corridors, the canteen, and recreational areas, and Islamic extracurricular activities. Field notes were systematically maintained. Second, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with fifty-three participants: fifteen IRE teachers, six principals and vice-principals for curriculum, twenty-two students, and ten parents. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim.

Third, documentary analysis was applied to formal curriculum documents, lesson plans (RPP), school regulations, internal school bulletins, and visual artifacts in classroom environments.

Data analysis followed the procedures of inductive-deductive thematic analysis, conducted iteratively through three cycles of initial coding, category development, and theoretical synthesis. The analytical process was guided by the theoretical framework of hidden curriculum and social piety developed in Section 2, while remaining attentive to emergent themes that extended beyond the initial framework. Research trustworthiness was ensured through data triangulation, member checking with key participants, a rigorous audit trail, and peer debriefing with two colleague researchers.

FINDINGS

Classroom Climate and Ritual Routines: The Embodied Hidden Curriculum

The first and most salient finding concerns the central role of daily ritual routines in producing students' value dispositions. At all three research sites, the school day began with a broadly consistent set of practices: congregational dhuha prayer, collective Quranic recitation, and morning supplication led by teachers on a rotating basis. For most students, these routines had become entirely habitual something long practiced without explicit reflection. Yet sociologically, these routines constitute an exceptionally powerful mechanism of hidden curriculum.

Our observations revealed that congregational prayer — particularly when teachers participated and stood in the same row as their students communicated a potent message about equality before God and the fundamental sameness of human dignity regardless of social position. A female student at SMA Islam Al-Hikmah articulated this with striking clarity: "In the classroom, Pak Ahmad is the teacher and we are students. But in the prayer row, he is standing right beside me, prostrating together. That teaches something that cannot be explained in words." This is a paradigmatic instance of hidden curriculum: learning that occurs through participatory experience, internalized far more deeply than any verbal proposition.

The classroom climate in IRE learning also operated as a medium of hidden curriculum through the manner in which teachers managed disagreement and student error. At SMA

Islam Al-Falah, we repeatedly observed a senior IRE teacher responding to factually incorrect student answers with the phrase: "That is a courageous answer. Let us examine it together." This practice consistently observed across multiple sessions communicated values absent from any official lesson plan: that intellectual courage is valued, that correction is a collective rather than individualized process, and that error is not a source of shame but a point of departure for learning. This is a hidden curriculum that produces dispositions of intellectual honesty and moral courage foundational dimensions of social piety. (Whittaker, D. 2024; Explores how hidden curricula emerge in teacher–student interactions, showing that classroom climate communicates values beyond lesson plans, much like your example of valuing intellectual courage. (Steuer, R., Rosentritt-Brunn, G., & Dresel, M. 2013; Tulis, M., & Ainley, M. (2011).

These findings resonate powerfully with Bernstein's (1975) argument that the dominant pedagogical code of an educational institution — the way knowledge is packaged, authority managed, and evaluation conducted — is the primary medium of hidden curriculum. In the context of IRE, the pedagogical code with the greatest formative power is the relational code: the manner in which teachers treat students as dignified subjects worthy of respect reproduces dispositions of mutual regard that lie at the heart of social piety.

Relational Expectations Between Teachers and Students: Authority That Shapes

The second theme emerging strongly from our data concerns the role of relational expectations including expectations never stated explicitly in shaping students' values and social piety. Across all three research sites, there existed a powerful implicit consensus about how the teacher-student relationship should be structured: within a framework qualitatively distinct from teacher-student relationships in general public schools, precisely because it is framed within the language and symbolism of Islam. (Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. , 2002; Sujak, S. F., Sulaiman, R., Jamari, S., & Rahmat, N. H. 2024).

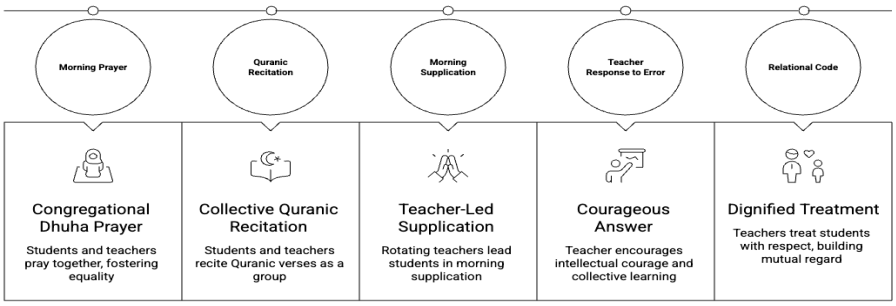

Figure 1. Key Ritual Routines and Classroom Climate in IRE Learning

The use of the honorific "Ustadz/Ustadzah" for IRE teachers and in several cases for all teachers regardless of subject is not merely a linguistic convention. It is a symbolic practice communicating that the teacher-student relationship is not simply a professional-client transaction, but a moral-spiritual relation demanding respect and responsibility from both parties. Several students reported that "disappointing the Ustadz" felt morally weightier than receiving a poor academic grade a telling indicator that relational expectations had successfully internalized moral standards that run deeper than academic performance criteria.

At SMA Islam Darussalam, we observed a particularly compelling practice: the IRE teacher routinely closed each learning session by asking students, "Today, what will you do differently?" This question was ungraded, unmeasured, and absent from any assessment rubric. Yet it communicated a clear and consistent expectation: that IRE learning should change behavior, not merely accumulate knowledge. This constitutes a hidden curriculum that systematically links religious reflection to social action the constitutive connection of social piety.

This finding reinforces argument that authority relations within the classroom are the most powerful curriculum of all. In the context of Islamic schools, the moral-spiritual character of the IRE teacher's authority rather than merely cognitive-academic authority means that the hidden curriculum transmitted through it carries a depth and durability that substantially exceeds that of formal moral instruction.Whittaker, D. (2024). For more details, as shown in Figure 2.

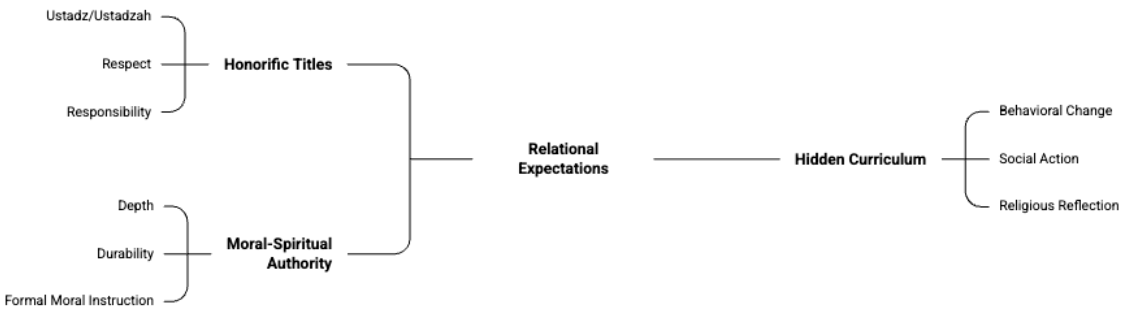

Figure 2. Relational Expectations in Islamic Schools

Spatial Symbolism and Institutional Artifacts: The Environment That Speaks

The third dimension of hidden curriculum identified in our research concerns the symbolic dimensions of the school's physical space and the visual artifacts that inhabit the learning environment. Across all three research sites, the physical space was consistently employed as an intense medium of value communication. Classroom and corridor walls were populated with Quranic verses, socially-themed hadith, quotations from Islamic scholars on justice and compassion, and student-produced works reflecting their spiritual experiences. Woolner, P., Hall, E., Higgins, S., McCaughey, C., & Wall, K. 2007).Gull, F., & Shehzad, S. (2015; Higgins, C. (2010). Woolner, P.,2007)

What proved most analytically revealing was not the content of these artifacts per se, but the logic of their selection. At SMA Islam Al-Hikmah, we found that the overwhelming majority of verses and hadith displayed in school corridors concerned social relationships rather than ritual obligations: the verse on justice (Surah An-Nisa: 135), a hadith on care for one's neighbor, a quotation on the importance of honesty in dealing. When asked about these choices, the principal responded: "We want students to walk through this corridor and unconsciously carry that message. It is not a lesson that is taught, it is a lesson that is felt." This statement represents a remarkably self-conscious articulation of the hidden curriculum logic.

Spatial arrangement also communicated values about inclusivity and communal solidarity. At SMA Islam Al-Falah, the school canteen ostensibly a marginal educational space was deliberately designed as a social space that encouraged cross-group interaction: long communal tables replaced individual ones, and a large poster bearing a hadith on brotherhood was prominently displayed on the main wall. The principal explained his philosophy: "Eating together is also an act of worship. We want the children to learn to sit with anyone, not to choose only certain friends." This is a hidden curriculum actively producing dispositions of social inclusivity a vital dimension of social piety.

These findings reinforce insight that space is a value-laden social production. In Islamic schools, space is not merely a container for learning activities; it is itself, curriculum a medium continuously communicating, reinforcing, and reproducing the Islamic values that constitute the institution's educational purpose.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this research carry significant implications for IRE curriculum development and Islamic educational policy in Indonesia, organized here along three intersecting dimensions: theoretical, pedagogical, and policy. Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of an analytical framework for understanding value production in Islamic education. By demonstrating that social piety is produced primarily through the hidden curriculum rather than formal instruction, it challenges the assumption dominant in IRE curriculum scholarship that strengthening religious values is principally achieved through expanding content coverage or increasing instructional hours. We argue instead that the quality of classroom climate, the character of the teacher-student relationship, and the design of the physical learning environment are the variables that most decisively shape students' social piety. This reconceptualization has significant consequences for how the effectiveness of Islamic religious education is evaluated and theorized. (Noddings, N., 2005 ;Turunen, T., & Mälkki, K. ,2015)

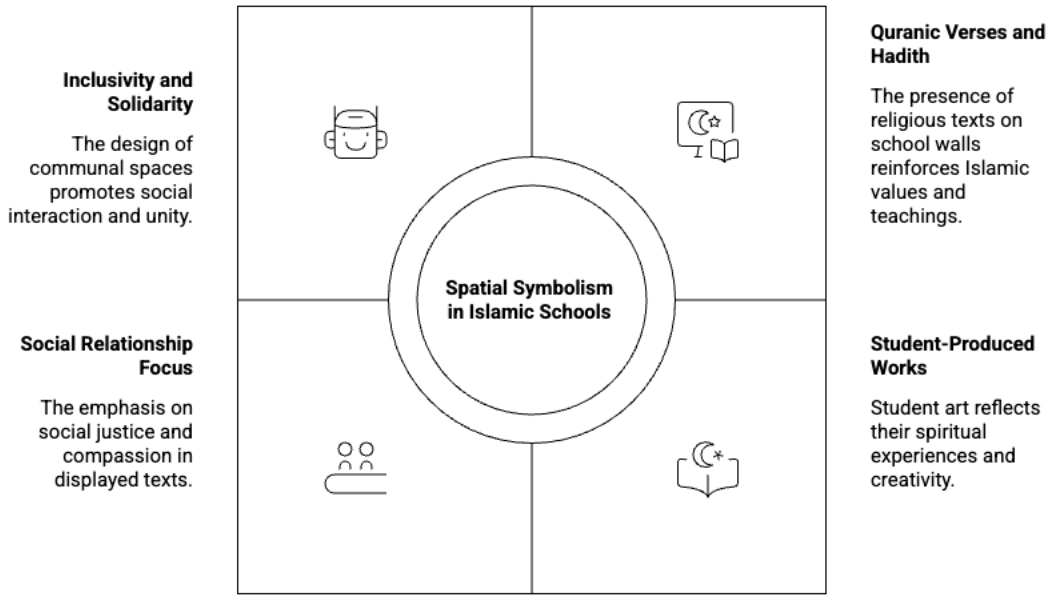

Figure 3. The Symbolic Power of Islamic School Environments

Pedagogically, the implications point toward the necessity of developing IRE teacher competencies that extend well beyond subject matter mastery. The IRE teacher who effectively produces social piety through the hidden curriculum is one who possesses reflective awareness of how the manner of speaking, the response to student error, the

management of disagreement, and the design of the classroom environment all constitute "messages" received by students at the level of habitus. Pre-service and in-service IRE teacher education programs need to explicitly incorporate the hidden curriculum dimension into their curricula, preparing prospective teachers to function as "architects of the value ecology" of their classrooms. (Hattie, J., & Timperley, H.,2007 ; Zeichner, K. M., & Liston, D. P. , 1996; Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. 2007).

At the policy level, this research suggests that quality evaluation of IRE learning should not be limited to the measurement of formal cognitive-affective outcomes, but should encompass assessment of school climate quality, the character of pedagogical relationships, and the design of the physical environment as media of value formation. The current Merdeka Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) opens space for precisely such innovation through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) and the character dimensions integrated into learning. Islamic schools are well positioned to leverage this space for the deliberate design of hidden curriculum aligned with social piety outcomes. (Tan, C. 2011; Davids, N., & Waghid, Y., 2016)

Finally, this research has implications for the dialogue between Islamic education and national character education. Social piety, as we have conceptualized it, is not an exclusively Islamic educational objective: it intersects meaningfully with the national character education goals articulated in the Pancasila Student Profile (Profil Pelajar Pancasila). Islamic schools, with the richness of their Islamic hidden curriculum, possess substantial potential to contribute to the national project of forming citizens who are morally grounded, empathically responsive, and committed to justice. (Halstead, J. M., 2004; Lickona, T. 1996; Tan, C. 2011; Davids, N., & Waghid, Y. ,2016).

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the hidden curriculum in Islamic Religious Education in Islamic schools and its relationship to value production and the formation of students' social piety. Drawing on ten months of qualitative field research at three Islamic senior high schools in East Java, we identified three primary channels through which the hidden curriculum operates: classroom climate and daily ritual routines, relational expectations between teachers and students, and the symbolic dimensions of the school's physical space. These three

channels collectively produce value dispositions constitutive of social piety: empathy, honesty, collective responsibility, and sensitivity to injustice.

The central argument of this article is that social piety as an expression of faith manifested in ethical and just social action is produced primarily not through the formal IRE curriculum but through participatory experience in the Islamic school's value ecology as shaped by the hidden curriculum. This means that efforts to strengthen social piety in Islamic education cannot be resolved through curriculum document revision or the addition of instructional hours. They require a more fundamental transformation: in the quality of the school climate, in the character of pedagogical relationships, and in the reflective awareness of teachers as architects of value.

The limitations of this research must be honestly acknowledged. The focus on three schools in East Java constrains the generalizability of findings to Islamic school contexts that differ geographically, demographically, and in terms of Islamic orientation. Further research is needed to examine whether the hidden curriculum mechanisms identified here operate similarly in madrasah, boarding school-based schools (pesantren sekolah), and Islamic schools outside Java. Additionally, longitudinal research following students beyond the school years is needed to test the extent to which value dispositions produced through the IRE hidden curriculum genuinely endure and manifest in long-term social life.

This research invites educators, researchers, and Islamic educational policymakers to move beyond preoccupation with the formal curriculum and to attend more seriously and systematically to the dimensions of education that are unwritten yet profoundly consequential. In the language of the Quran, the aim of Islamic education is the formation of the insan kamil — the complete human being who integrates knowledge, faith, and righteous social action in daily life. The achievement of this aim, this research argues, depends substantially on the quality of the hidden curriculum embedded in the institutional ecology of the Islamic school.

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