

"We Are Family" for Promoting Student Wellbeing and Advancing SDG 4: A Multi-Site Case Study in Islamic Junior High Schools

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To investigate how student wellbeing is realized in Islamic junior high schools, examine the implementation of the We Are Family (WAF) school culture program, identify the character outcomes generated through the program, and develop a conceptual model of a wellbeing-based school culture. **Method:** A qualitative multi-site case study design was employed at two Islamic junior high schools in Sidoarjo. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and document analysis involving principals, vice principals, program teachers, and students. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, including data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing, followed by cross-site analysis to identify convergent and divergent patterns. **Results:** The findings reveal that student wellbeing is realized through four interconnected dimensions: academic, psychological, social, and spiritual wellbeing. The WAF program operates through a relational culture characterized by familial climate, emotional-spiritual support, collective character development, and school-family collaboration. The program contributes to the development of responsibility, empathy, value-based discipline, mutual respect, sense of belonging, and independence. Cross-site analysis further identifies six essential elements of a wellbeing-based school culture: values-based environment, transformational leadership, psychological safety, dialogic communication, developmental discipline, and school-family collaboration. **Novelty:** Contributes to SDGs 4 by proposing the WAF School Culture Model and introduces spiritual wellbeing as a distinct fourth dimension of student wellbeing, extending existing wellbeing frameworks by integrating organizational culture, positive psychology, character education, and faith-based educational perspectives into a comprehensive school wellbeing framework.

INTRODUCTION

Student wellbeing has gained increasing traction in educational research worldwide as scholars and policymakers recognize that academic achievement alone is an insufficient measure of educational success (Huebner et al., 2004; Seligman, 2011). The concept of wellbeing encompassing physical, emotional, social, and academic dimensions and reflects the degree to which students experience safety, belonging, positive relationships, and meaningful engagement within their school environment (Konu & Rimpelä, 2002; Noble & McGrath, 2015). Contemporary educational discourse increasingly emphasizes the need for schools to create environments that support holistic student development, not merely cognitive achievement. Consequently, school culture has emerged as a critical factor influencing students' psychological adjustment, social relationships, character formation, and overall wellbeing.

The importance of student wellbeing becomes particularly evident when considering the adverse consequences associated with its absence. Research consistently demonstrates that low levels of wellbeing are associated with bullying, academic disengagement, mental health problems, school avoidance, and dropout (Kutsyuruba et

al., 2024; Raniti et al., 2025). In Indonesia, the urgency of this issue is underscored by alarming national data. The Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) reported 2,031 child rights violations involving 2,063 child victims in 2025 alone, with school-based violence, sexual abuse, academic stress, and cyberbullying constituting the leading categories. Between January and November 2025, six fatal violence incidents were recorded in educational institutions, and approximately one-third of the 26 child suicide cases during the same period were triggered by school-related pressures. These statistics highlight a systemic failure to provide school environments that are genuinely safe, nurturing, and conducive to holistic development.

Although school culture has been widely recognized as a significant determinant of educational quality, limited research has explored how culturally embedded school practices systematically promote student wellbeing within the Indonesian Islamic school context. Islamic schools occupy a distinctive position within Indonesia's educational landscape by integrating religious values, moral development, and academic learning. However, empirical evidence explaining how faith-based school cultures contribute to student wellbeing remains relatively scarce. This gap highlights the need for studies that examine school cultural practices capable of fostering supportive relationships, positive character development, and student wellbeing.

The present study seeks to address this gap by investigating the "We Are Family" (WAF) school culture program implemented in two Islamic junior high schools in Sidoarjo, East Java. The term "We Are Family" is employed by the researcher as a conceptual label to describe a collection of familial-relational cultural practices designed to strengthen empathy, trust, emotional support, spiritual development, collaborative character building, and partnerships between schools and families. As a qualitative researcher, the author serves as the primary instrument for data collection and interpretation, seeking to understand how participants experience, perceive, and construct meanings around the WAF culture within their daily school lives. The central research questions guiding this study are: (1) How is student wellbeing realized across academic, psychological, and social dimensions? (2) How is the WAF program implemented to promote student wellbeing? (3) What positive character traits emerge through the WAF program? (4) What does a student wellbeing-oriented school organizational culture look like?

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates Organizational Culture Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, Positive Psychology, and Character Education. Organizational Culture Theory provides a lens for understanding how shared values, norms, and practices shape behavior within educational institutions. Ecological Systems Theory emphasizes the interconnected influence of school, family, and community environments on student development. Positive Psychology contributes concepts related to wellbeing, flourishing, resilience, and positive relationships, while Character Education highlights the cultivation of moral values and prosocial behavior. By synthesizing these perspectives, the study develops a conceptual understanding of how a family-oriented school culture can function as a mechanism for promoting student wellbeing. The resulting "We Are Family" school culture model offers a holistic framework that may be applicable not only to Islamic schools but also to broader faith-based and character-oriented educational contexts.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 on Quality Education, emphasize the importance of providing inclusive, equitable, and meaningful

learning environments that support students' holistic development. Beyond academic achievement, quality education requires schools to foster psychological safety, positive relationships, character development, and student wellbeing. In this context, school culture plays an essential role as an institutional foundation that shapes students' learning experiences and personal growth. Previous studies have highlighted that supportive school environments contribute to students' sense of belonging, engagement, and overall wellbeing. However, limited research has examined how culturally embedded school practices, particularly within Islamic school contexts, contribute to the realization of quality education aligned with SDG 4.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research design

This study employed a qualitative approach with a multi-site case study design (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2012). The multi-site design was chosen to enable cross-site comparison, thereby enhancing the depth, richness, and analytical generalizability of findings beyond what a single-site study could afford. The study was conducted at two Islamic junior high schools in Sidoarjo Regency, East Java, Indonesia: SMP Al-Falah Assalam Sidoarjo (Site I) and SMP Islam Cendekia Mandiri Sidoarjo (Site II). These sites were purposively selected based on their established reputations for positive school culture, observable student wellbeing, and sustained implementation of family-oriented programs characteristics identified through preliminary observations conducted in January 2026.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation across decision-making levels, program implementation, and direct experience. At each site, the following informants were engaged: the school principal (strategic policy and vision); the vice-principal for student affairs (program implementation and student management); the program accompanying teacher (direct program facilitation and student observation); and three students (direct program recipients). This yielded a total of 18 informants across both sites. Participants were chosen based on their direct involvement in, knowledge of, or experience with the WAF program and student wellbeing initiatives.

Data collection

Three complementary data collection techniques were employed: in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentary analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face using a semi-structured protocol, allowing informants to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives while keeping inquiry anchored to research questions. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Participatory observation was conducted in an unstructured manner, with the researcher immersed in school daily activities including worship, class mentoring, leadership training, student committee meetings, and informal interactions to capture enacted culture beyond what informants articulated in interviews. Documentary analysis encompassed school program documents, activity reports, minutes of meetings, student development logs, photographic records, and policy documents, providing corroborating evidence for interview and observation data. Field research was conducted throughout February 2026.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using Miles Huberman, comprising three iterative phases: data condensation (selecting, focusing, abstracting, simplifying, and transforming raw data), data display (organizing condensed data into narrative descriptions, tables, and figures), and conclusion drawing/verification. A structured coding scheme was developed to organize data by site, data source, informant type, and research focus area. Within-site analysis was first conducted independently for each school to generate site-specific propositions, followed by cross-site analysis to identify convergent patterns, divergent emphases, and integrative themes that transcended individual sites.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria. Credibility was ensured via triangulation of sources (multiple informant types) and techniques (interviews, observations, and documents), combined with prolonged engagement at each site and member-checking of preliminary findings with key informants. Transferability was supported through thick, contextualized description of each site. Dependability was maintained via an audit trail documenting all methodological decisions, reviewed by doctoral supervisors through regular academic consultation. Confirmability was secured through systematic audit of data-to-conclusion traceability and reflexive journaling by the researcher.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Realizing student wellbeing: Three dimensions

Both sites positioned student wellbeing not as a supplementary goal but as the foundational premise of the educational enterprise. Across informant groups, wellbeing was consistently conceptualized as a multidimensional condition encompassing academic, psychological, and social components, and was understood to be a prerequisite for effective learning rather than its by-product.

Academic wellbeing was understood as students' capacity to engage in learning with comfort, motivation, and meaningful support. At Site I, the vice-principal stated: "Wellbeing is not an add-on; it is the foundation. When children feel safe and valued, the learning process runs optimally." Teachers at both sites reported that students who felt emotionally supported demonstrated markedly higher levels of participation, concentration, and academic self-efficacy. Documentary analysis revealed that school program structures including mentoring, homeroom teacher guidance, counseling services, and integrated extracurricular activities were explicitly designed to link emotional safety with academic engagement. The cross-site pattern confirmed that more than 80% of informants attributed positive motivation and learning engagement directly to the supportive school culture.

Psychological wellbeing was operationalized as emotional stability, self-confidence, stress resilience, and freedom from psychological threat. Both schools provided structured psychological support through weekly mentoring groups (halaqah), open counseling, reflective daily rituals, and individualized homeroom teacher guidance. Observations confirmed that teacher-student interactions were conducted with warmth and personal attention: teachers regularly checked on individual students' emotional states before and after lessons, and students demonstrated willingness to express difficulties and vulnerabilities without fear of ridicule. At Site II, a teacher noted: "When

students are not emotionally safe, they cannot concentrate and often display avoidance behaviors." Documentary evidence including counseling records, mentoring logs, and student development reports corroborated informant accounts of systematic psychological support.

Social wellbeing was realized through harmonious interpersonal relationships, inclusive belonging, and positive peer and teacher-student dynamics. Both schools deliberately structured activities to build social capital: student leadership training, cooperative worship practices, collaborative class meetings, cross-grade mentoring, and school-family communication platforms. Observations revealed inclusive and egalitarian interaction patterns teachers joined students in rows during congregational prayer rather than supervising from a distance, class meetings were conducted as peer forums rather than teacher lectures, and students freely approached teachers in informal settings. These dynamics cultivated strong senses of community membership and mutual support.

Implementing the "we are family" program

The WAF program was not a single initiative but a layered cultural ecosystem comprising four interlocking mechanisms. Table 1 maps implementation activities across both sites. Despite different emphases, both sites operationalised the programme through two bonding mechanisms: horizontal bonding (peer-to-peer) and vertical bonding (teacher-to-student).

Table 1. Implementation of the 'we are family' programme across sites

Dimension	Site I (SMP Al-Falah Assalam)	Site II (SMP Islam Cendekia Mandiri)
Primary approach	Spiritual-character integration	Socio-participatory communication
Core activities	Congregational prayer, LDKS, halaqah pekanan, homeroom mentoring, home visit	Morning sharing, open counselling, home visit, student appreciation week, outbound
Teacher role	Spiritual guide and caregiver	Facilitator and counsellor
Bonding type	Vertical (teacher-student via ibadah)	Horizontal (peer via forums)
Programme goal	Spiritual-based wellbeing	Participation-based wellbeing
Shared outcome	Safe, supportive school environment	Safe, supportive school environment

Note. LDKS = *Latihan Dasar Kepemimpinan Siswa* (Student Leadership Basic Training); *Halaqah pekanan* = weekly small-group mentoring circle.

Site I built its familial climate primarily through spiritual habituation and pastoral mentoring. Congregational prayer was observed to dissolve hierarchical distance, homeroom mentoring provided individualised emotional attention, and while LDKS created intense shared experiences that generated lasting peer solidarity. The school also conducted Student Appreciation Week, home visits, and outdoor bonding activities (*rihlah tarbawiyah*) to deepen student-teacher and peer bonds. A program teacher

explained: "This program is not just routine activities; it is an effort to build emotional bonds. Closeness is essential so that students feel safe and cared for." Site II emphasized structured open communication channels, notably a Friday morning sharing session in which students could freely share experiences, feelings, or concerns with teachers as empathic facilitators. Home visits enabled teachers to contextualise students' lives, while student appreciation week extended recognition beyond academic metrics to encompass character, leadership, creativity, and social contribution. Both approaches, though distinct in emphasis, generated observable warmth, accessibility, and emotional security.

Emotional and spiritual support were inseparable at both sites, reflecting the Islamic educational philosophy that spiritual grounding produces psychological stability. Mentoring sessions, reflective journaling, daily invocations, and homeroom counseling served dual functions: they simultaneously oriented students toward transcendent meaning and provided concrete emotional regulation opportunities. Homeroom teachers occupied a distinctive pastoral role functioning as surrogate parents responsible for knowing each student individually, monitoring behavioral changes, and proactively addressing personal or familial challenges before they escalated. Home visits extended this care into the domestic sphere. Students at Site I confirmed: "During LDKS it felt most memorable, because we collaborated, spent nights together, and shared stories that is where we became deeply close with friends and mentors."

Both schools actively cultivated collective character through structured experiences that required cooperation, shared accountability, and leadership practice. Site I emphasized LDKS, congregational discipline, and mentoring as primary formation contexts. Site II prioritized a school culture matriculation program for new students a systematic socialization into school norms, Islamic behavioral practices (*Sunnah*), mosque management responsibility, and student leadership development. This matriculation program was notable in standardizing positive behavioral habits from the outset, thereby creating a unified cultural baseline across cohorts regardless of students' varied home backgrounds.

Both schools maintained robust non-academic support infrastructures aligned with family involvement. School committee meetings provided regular platforms for teachers and parents to exchange information about students' academic progress and personal challenges, creating a bi-directional communication channel that bridged school and home environments. Site II's Student Appreciation Week explicitly recognized social, character, and leadership achievements alongside academic ones, communicating to students that they were valued as whole persons rather than merely academic performers. At Site I, Friday community gatherings served as informal parent-teacher-student forums that strengthened school-family solidarity.

Character formation through the WAF program

Across both sites, the WAF program generated consistent character development outcomes, though the pathways differed by school context. Six dominant positive characters were identified across both sites through iterative coding (Table 2).

Table 2. Character outcomes by site

Character	Site I	Site II	Cross-site
Responsibility	✓ Dominant	✓ Dominant	✓

Character	Site I	Site II	Cross-site
Empathy & social concern	✓ Strong	✓ Strong	✓
Discipline (value-based)	✓ Strong	✓ Dominant	✓
Mutual respect	✓ Strong	✓ Moderate	✓
Sense of belonging	✓ Moderate	✓ Strong	✓
Independence	✓ Moderate	✓ Moderate	✓
Value transfer (home/community)	- Limited	✓ Documented	- Site-specific

Table 2 presents the character outcomes observed in the two research sites (Site I and Site II) as well as the cross-site findings. Overall, both schools demonstrated success in fostering positive character traits among students, reflecting the effectiveness of their school culture and student well-being initiatives. Responsibility emerged as the most prominent character trait in both research sites. Site I and Site II consistently demonstrated a dominant level of responsibility, indicating that students were able to fulfill their academic and social obligations, complete assigned tasks, and adhere to school expectations. The cross-site analysis confirms responsibility as a core character outcome that developed consistently across both schools.

Empathy and social concern were also strongly evident in both sites. Students demonstrated sensitivity to the needs and feelings of others, willingness to assist peers, and active participation in social and community-oriented activities. The consistency of this finding across both schools suggests that the educational environments effectively promoted positive social relationships and inclusive interactions. Regarding value-based discipline, both schools achieved strong outcomes, with Site II showing a more dominant manifestation than Site I. This form of discipline extends beyond mere compliance with school regulations and reflects students' internalization of moral, ethical, and religious values. Consequently, discipline emerged as one of the most consistently developed character traits across the two sites.

Mutual respect was found to be strong in Site I and moderate in Site II. Although the degree of development varied, both schools fostered respectful interactions among students, teachers, and other members of the school community. The cross-site findings indicate that respect remained an important component of the positive school culture in both settings. For sense of belonging, Site II demonstrated stronger outcomes than Site I. This finding suggests that students in Site II experienced a higher level of emotional attachment and connectedness to their school community. Nevertheless, both schools succeeded in cultivating a sense of belonging, which contributed positively to student well-being and engagement.

Independence was observed at a moderate level in both sites. Students showed the ability to manage responsibilities and make decisions independently; however, further reinforcement may be required to enhance the development of this character trait. A notable difference emerged in value transfer to home and community settings. In Site I, evidence of value transfer beyond the school environment was limited and not clearly documented. In contrast, Site II provided documented evidence that students applied school-acquired values within their families and communities. As a result, this outcome

is classified as a site-specific finding, reflecting a distinctive characteristic that was not consistently observed across both schools.

A program teacher at Site I observed: "The WAF program makes students feel part of one big family. They care more for each other, are no longer individualistic, and have begun resolving problems through dialogue." At Site II, responsibility and discipline were particularly salient, but importantly, these emerged through internalized moral agency rather than compliance with external authority. The vice-principal described: "Children who used to be frequently late now feel uncomfortable breaking the rules because they feel they are harming their own 'family.'" This shift from external compliance to intrinsic motivation represented a significant character development outcome. Students also reported that WAF-inspired values transferred to their home lives: "At home I now help my mother more often, washing dishes and sweeping—what used to be rare has now become a habit." Documentary evidence from home visit reports and parent communication records corroborated this cross-contextual generalization of character.

Both sites showed convergence on: relational emotional practices as the primary character formation mechanism; teacher modeling as a core pedagogical strategy; psychological safety as the enabling condition for authentic character expression; and cooperation, empathy, and responsibility as the dominant character outcomes. Sites diverged in emphasis: Site I foregrounded spiritual practices and formal mentoring structures, while Site II emphasized communicative openness, participatory culture, and family extension. Both approaches demonstrated effectiveness in producing students with prosocial, disciplined, and community-oriented character profiles.

Overall, the cross-site analysis reveals that responsibility, empathy and social concern, value-based discipline, mutual respect, sense of belonging, and independence were the key character outcomes developed in both schools. Among these, responsibility and value-based discipline emerged as the most dominant traits. Meanwhile, value transfer to home and community contexts was a distinctive outcome found primarily in Site II, highlighting variations in implementation and impact between the two schools. These findings suggest that a student well-being-oriented school culture contributes not only to students' academic development but also to their holistic character formation.

Student wellbeing-oriented school culture

Synthesizing findings across both sites, a student wellbeing-oriented school organizational culture was found to comprise five integrative dimensions. Five organisational culture components were identified as constitutive of student wellbeing across both sites: (1) religious and values-based culture, (2) supportive and participatory leadership, (3) safe and inclusive school climate (psychological safety), (4) open communication, and (5) humanistic and restorative discipline.

Sites diverged in emphasis: Site I foregrounded religious-spiritual culture and humanistic discipline; Site II foregrounded student voice, inclusive communication, and relational equity. Table 3 presents the cross-site analysis of the key components of a wellbeing-based school culture in Site I and Site II. Although each school demonstrates distinctive characteristics in implementing student well-being practices, the findings reveal several convergent themes that collectively form the foundation of a wellbeing-oriented educational environment.

Table 3. Wellbeing-based school culture: Cross-site analysis

Culture Component	Site I	Site II	Convergence
Values foundation	Religious-spiritual culture	Participatory & inclusive culture	Values-based environment
Leadership style	Supportive, character-driven	Participatory, open	Transformational leadership
School climate	Safe, warm, religiously grounded	Safe, inclusive, egalitarian	Psychological safety
Communication	Personal mentoring dialogues	Open forums, morning sharing	Dialogic, humanistic
Discipline approach	Persuasive & educative	Humanistic & restorative	Non-punitive, developmental
Parent involvement	Extended family support	Structured home visits	School-family collaboration

The first component, values foundation, shows that Site I emphasizes a religious-spiritual culture, where school activities, interactions, and policies are grounded in religious values and moral development. In contrast, Site II promotes a participatory and inclusive culture, encouraging active involvement and equal opportunities for all members of the school community. Despite these differences, both schools converge in creating a values-based environment, indicating that shared values serve as the primary foundation for fostering student well-being. In terms of leadership style, Site I demonstrates a supportive and character-driven approach, with school leaders focusing on moral guidance and personal development. Site II adopts a participatory and open leadership style, encouraging collaboration and stakeholder involvement in decision-making processes. Cross-site analysis reveals that both approaches reflect the characteristics of transformational leadership, where leaders inspire, empower, and support the growth of students and school members. Regarding school climate, Site I provides a safe, warm, and religiously grounded atmosphere, while Site II fosters a safe, inclusive, and egalitarian environment. Although the contextual expressions differ, both schools prioritize creating conditions in which students feel accepted, respected, and protected. Consequently, the convergence is identified as psychological safety, a key condition that enables students to learn, participate, and develop confidently.

The communication component also illustrates variations in implementation. Site I emphasizes personal mentoring dialogues, allowing teachers and students to build close interpersonal relationships through individual guidance. Site II utilizes open forums and morning-sharing sessions, creating opportunities for collective expression and dialogue. Despite these differences, both schools demonstrate dialogic and humanistic communication, characterized by mutual respect, active listening, and meaningful interaction. For the discipline approach, Site I employs a persuasive and educative model, focusing on guidance and character formation rather than punishment. Site II adopts a humanistic and restorative approach, emphasizing reflection, accountability, and relationship repair when misconduct occurs. The convergence of these approaches is a non-punitive and developmental disciplinary system, aimed at promoting personal growth and positive behavioral change.

Finally, parent involvement is implemented differently across the two sites. Site I relies on extended family support, where parents and family members actively contribute to students' educational experiences. Site II utilizes structured home visits as a formal strategy for strengthening school-family relationships and monitoring student development. Despite these differences, both schools demonstrate strong school-family collaboration, recognizing that student well-being is enhanced when educational responsibilities are shared between schools and families. Both sites also acknowledged implementation challenges, including teacher workload, inconsistency in value application across all staff, and the countervailing influence of digital media and home environments. These tensions point to the ecological embeddedness of school culture: sustainable wellbeing cultures require not only strong internal coherence but active bridging of school values into students' broader social worlds.

The cross-site findings indicate that a wellbeing-based school culture is not defined by identical practices but by common underlying principles. While Site I tends to emphasize religious values, personal relationships, and character guidance, Site II focuses more on participation, inclusivity, and collaborative engagement. Nevertheless, both schools converge around six essential elements: a values-based environment, transformational leadership, psychological safety, dialogic communication, developmental discipline, and school-family collaboration. Together, these elements create a supportive ecosystem that nurtures students' academic, social, emotional, and moral development, thereby contributing to the realization of holistic student well-being.

Discussion

Spirituality as a fourth dimension of student wellbeing

The most theoretically generative finding of this study is the empirical grounding of spirituality as a distinct, non-reducible dimension of student wellbeing in Islamic school contexts. Existing frameworks such as PERMA (Seligman, 2011) and the school wellbeing model (Konu & Rimpelä, 2002) do not explicitly accommodate the spiritual dimension. The present findings demonstrate that congregational prayer, Qur'anic reflection, and mentoring activities systematically produce psychological calm, self-regulation, and moral identity outcomes that cannot be adequately explained by purely psychological constructs. This aligns with emerging work on spiritual intelligence in educational contexts (Pandya, 2021) and calls for revision of wellbeing measurement instruments to incorporate spiritual indicators for use in religiously grounded schools. Future research should develop and validate a four-dimensional student wellbeing scale that incorporates spiritual wellbeing as a psychometrically distinct subscale, using samples drawn from Islamic, Catholic, and other faith-based school systems.

The relational-based school culture mechanism

The "we are family" programme functions as a relational ecology that operates through two analytically distinct bonding pathways. Horizontal bonding among students generated most powerfully through LDKS and morning sharing produces solidarity, collective identity, and peer support that buffer psychological distress. Vertical bonding between teachers and students expressed through congregational participation, homeroom care, and home visits produces relational trust that enables authentic emotional disclosure and receptiveness to moral guidance.

This two-pathway mechanism extends Raniti et al.'s (2025) finding that school connectedness functions as a protective factor against psychological distress. By decomposing connectedness into its horizontal and vertical components, the present study enables more targeted programme design: schools seeking to reduce peer conflict may prioritise horizontal bonding activities, while schools seeking to improve compliance and character may invest more heavily in vertical bonding practices. Critically, students consistently reported that shared experiences (*pengalaman kebersamaan*) were more meaningful than the programmatic structure per se. This constructivist finding that wellbeing emerges from authentic relational experience, not formal programme architecture has important practical implications: scaling wellbeing programmes should focus on quality of relational interaction rather than expansion of activity catalogues.

Character formation: From compliance to values-based behaviour

The shift from external compliance to internal moral motivation, documented especially at S-II through the discipline-as-family-loyalty finding, empirically instantiates Kohlberg's (1984) movement from conventional to post-conventional moral reasoning. It also illustrates Lickona's (2013) progression from moral knowing through moral feeling to moral action: students are not simply told that being punctual matters; they feel that lateness would harm their school family, and they act accordingly. The transfer of values to home contexts corroborated by multiple data sources including home visit records and parent communications confirms Bronfenbrenner's (1979) mesosystem thesis. When school and family microsystems are aligned through sustained communication (home visits, parent forums), internalized school values generalise to home behaviour. Schools seeking lasting character impact should therefore treat parental engagement not as supplementary but as structurally integral to their character education system.

A discrepant finding deserves acknowledgement: not all students benefited equally from the programme. Students with greater familial instability or exposure to conflicting peer norms outside school showed lower programme engagement. This suggests a ceiling effect in school-based wellbeing programmes and points to the need for individually differentiated support consistent with social-emotional learning (SEL) approaches (Basileo et al., 2024).

The values-practice gap and organisational integrity

The most practically urgent finding is the gap between espoused values and values-in-use (Schein, 2010) identified at S-I, where some teachers inconsistently embodied the school's relational culture, and at S-II, where public reprimands contradicted the stated ethos of dignity and family. Schein's model predicts that when artefacts (observable practices) contradict espoused values, the lived culture reverts toward the deeper assumptions that govern actual behaviour. Closing this values-practice gap requires systemic interventions beyond individual teacher motivation: shared professional learning communities focused on relational pedagogy, structured peer observation, and leadership accountability for culture implementation fidelity. Transformational leadership (Burns, 1978) that articulates the moral vision of the school culture and creates conditions for distributed leadership in its enactment is a critical mediating variable.

Conceptual model

Synthesising findings across both sites, Figure 1 presents the Student Wellbeing-Based School Culture model. The model depicts a dynamic cycle wherein school culture inputs generate wellbeing outcomes, which in turn produce positive character formation, which then reinforces the school's cultural vitality. The model is characterised by four features. Religious and humanistic: spiritual practices serve simultaneously as pedagogical tools and community-building rituals. Inclusive and participatory: students are granted genuine voice in shaping school life. Open communication: dialogue is the default mode of conflict resolution and feedback. Safe space: physical and psychological safety is structurally embedded, not merely declared.

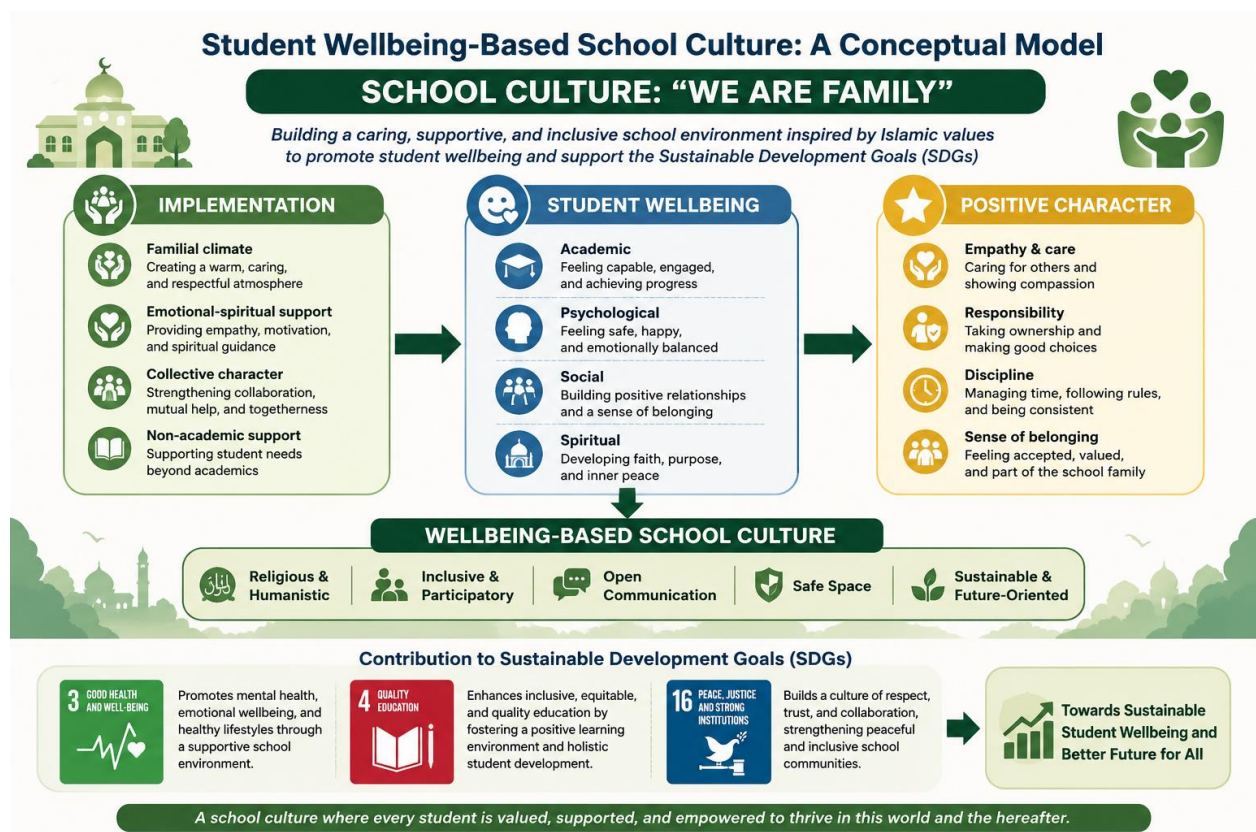


Figure 1. Student wellbeing-based school culture: A conceptual model

The model proposes that:

"We Are Family" School Culture → Student Wellbeing → Positive Character Development → Wellbeing-Based School Culture → Contribution to SDGs

In other words, a family-oriented school culture creates conditions that nurture students academically, psychologically, socially, and spiritually. This wellbeing then fosters positive character traits, resulting in a sustainable school culture that supports both educational excellence and the achievement of global sustainable development goals. This framework highlights that student wellbeing is not merely an individual outcome but a strategic pathway toward creating inclusive, caring, and sustainable educational communities.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: This multi-site qualitative study demonstrates that school culture functions as a powerful and systematically deployable mechanism for promoting student wellbeing. The Wellbeing through a Family Atmosphere (WAF) program implemented at SMP Al-Falah Assalam and SMP Islam Cendekia Mandiri Sidoarjo reveals that student wellbeing can be effectively fostered when schools intentionally create a familial relational climate grounded in religious values, strengthened through consistent interpersonal practices, supported by active family involvement, and sustained by humanistic leadership. These findings underscore the importance of school culture as a strategic foundation for ensuring that students experience safety, belonging, emotional support, and opportunities for holistic development. Ultimately, the study confirms that student wellbeing is not merely an ancillary outcome of educational processes but a central objective that can be achieved through intentional cultural design. **Implication:** The findings demonstrate that the "We Are Family" school culture model contributes to SDG 4 by establishing a supportive, inclusive, and holistic educational environment that promotes student wellbeing, character formation, and sustainable school development. Several important implications for educational policy and practice. First, school leaders should explicitly position student wellbeing as a core institutional goal embedded within the school vision, mission, and evaluation systems. Second, professional development programs should extend beyond instructional competencies to include social-emotional learning, counseling skills, and restorative communication practices. Third, disciplinary approaches should shift from punitive orientations toward restorative frameworks that emphasize relationship building and character development. Fourth, schools should strengthen partnerships with families through continuous and reciprocal communication channels. Finally, educational quality assurance systems should incorporate wellbeing indicators, such as students' sense of safety, belonging, positive relationships, and emotional wellbeing, as essential dimensions of school effectiveness. **Limitation:** Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this study. The qualitative multi-site design provides rich contextual insights but does not allow statistical generalization to broader populations. Furthermore, both research sites were purposively selected due to their strong and well-established school cultures, which may limit the applicability of the findings to schools with different organizational characteristics. In addition, the study was conducted within Islamic educational settings, and therefore the transferability of the WAF framework to secular or culturally diverse educational contexts requires further examination. **Future Research:** Future studies should explore the long-term effects of WAF-based school culture initiatives on student wellbeing, mental health, academic achievement, and social development through longitudinal and mixed-methods approaches. Comparative studies involving different educational levels, geographical regions, and cultural or religious contexts would provide deeper insights into the adaptability and effectiveness of the framework. Moreover, future research should investigate the institutional prerequisites and implementation strategies necessary for introducing wellbeing-oriented cultural programs in schools that do not yet possess strong cultural foundations. Such investigations would contribute to the development of scalable and sustainable models for enhancing student wellbeing across diverse educational settings.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Zuhrotul Mufidah contributed to the conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data collection, data curation, formal analysis, visualization, and preparation of the original manuscript draft. **Erny Roesminingsih** contributed to the conceptual framework, methodology development, supervision, validation, interpretation of the findings, and critical review and editing of the manuscript. **Karwanto** contributed to the research design, methodological validation, supervision, interpretation of the results, and critical review and editing of the manuscript. All authors participated in refining the conceptual model, reviewed the manuscript, and approved the final version for publication.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that there are no financial, professional, or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research process, interpretation of the findings, or the preparation of this manuscript.

STATEMENT ON THE USE OF AI OR DIGITAL TOOLS IN WRITING

The author acknowledges the use of AI-assisted writing tools, including ChatGPT (OpenAI), during the preparation of this manuscript. These tools were used solely to assist with language refinement, grammar correction, manuscript organization, and improvement of academic writing clarity. All research design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and final conclusions were conducted independently by the author. All AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed, verified, and revised to ensure the accuracy, originality, and academic integrity of the manuscript. The author takes full responsibility for the content and conclusions presented in this article.

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