

Literacy activities in madrasah education: examining student engagement, curiosity, and appreciation in character formation

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Abstract: Literacy activities have increasingly been recognized as a strategic approach in strengthening students' character within educational settings. This study aims to analyze the role of literacy activities in shaping the character of activeness, curiosity, and appreciation of achievement among seventh-grade students at MTsN 1 Kota Sungai Penuh. This research employed a descriptive qualitative approach, using observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation as data collection techniques. Data were analyzed using Miles' interactive model, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that consistently implemented literacy activities enhance students' activeness, including increased confidence in reading aloud, active participation in discussions, and initiative in accessing reading resources. Students' curiosity develops through the freedom to choose reading materials, the emergence of critical questioning, and independent exploration of information. In addition, appreciation practices such as praise, recognition of students' work, and the "most active reader" program foster intrinsic motivation, self-confidence, and a culture of appreciation. The novelty of this study lies in its integrated analysis of literacy activities in developing activeness, curiosity, and appreciation of achievement within a madrasah context. However, this study is limited to a single school setting. The implications suggest that literacy activities can serve as an effective strategy for strengthening students' character through consistent and contextual implementation.

Keywords: activeness, appreciation, character education, curiosity, literacy activities.

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Introduction

MTsN 1 Kota Sungai Penuh, Jambi is situated within a madrasah educational context in a predominantly rural environment, yet it possesses considerable intellectual potential among its students. The students grow up in a modest setting; however, they demonstrate active thinking skills, a high level of curiosity, and an appreciation for effort and achievement in the learning process. These potentials are reflected in students' interactions with daily learning activities, particularly through literacy practices in the school. Literacy activities function not only as a means of reading and writing but also as a space for character formation that involves activeness, knowledge exploration, and appreciation of the learning process. This condition indicates that literacy plays a strategic role in supporting students' character development within the madrasah environment.

Modern education demands more than mere academic achievement; it requires the development of a generation that is active, critical, highly curious, and capable of appreciating achievement. However, realities in the field indicate that such character formation does not always align with learning activities (Said, 2022). Fatmah, (2018) further emphasizes that

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character does not develop “naturally,” but must be cultivated through a planned and systematic educational process. This raises an important question: have schools truly provided spaces that effectively foster such character development? (Hanip, 2021). One approach that the government has increasingly strengthened is the integration of literacy into the Strengthening Character Education (PPK) program. Literacy is no longer understood merely as the ability to read and write, but as the capacity to comprehend, interpret, construct meaning, and critically utilize information (Rohman, 2022). Tasrif & Syaifullah, (2022) further argue that literacy is the heart of civilization, as it enables individuals to develop cognitive, social, and moral competencies. Therefore, literacy is directly related to the formation of students’ character (Sianturi & Dewi, 2021).

In the context of activeness, Hanipah et al., (2022) state that students develop when they are directly involved in learning experiences. Literacy activities designed through dialogue, reflection, and active reading practices can stimulate such activeness. When students are encouraged to seek additional information, express their thoughts in writing, or present their reading outcomes, they are essentially being trained to think and act independently (Aswita et al., 2022). Curiosity, often referred to as the “intellectual engine,” also develops through students’ interactions with texts, teachers, and peers. Literacy provides a space for exploring new ideas, engaging in academic discussions, and broadening perspectives through diverse texts. Within this literacy environment, students are encouraged to ask questions, confirm their understanding, and critically evaluate information (Azizah, L., Mujiburrohman, M., & Praptiningsih, 2023).

Meanwhile, appreciation of achievement is not merely associated with rewards or formal recognition. In Self-Determination Theory, students’ intrinsic motivation develops when their work is appreciated, discussed, or published. Literacy enables this process through activities such as student work exhibitions, writing anthologies, book reviews, or even simple appreciation from teachers in the classroom (Ashfiyah & Saffanah, 2022). At this point, literacy becomes a tool for building self-confidence and a strong, achievement-oriented attitude (Abd Rahman et al., 2022). These efforts have been implemented at MTsN 1 Kota Sungai Penuh. The school carries out various literacy activities that are interesting to examine, ranging from the 15-minute reading habit, literacy journal writing, classroom reading corners, and student work exhibitions. Previous studies also support the importance of literacy in character development. Saputra et al., (2025) In their study entitled “Strengthening Indonesian Literacy in Elementary Schools through Learning Strategies that Encourage Critical and Creative Thinking,” they found that reflective literacy practices significantly enhance students’ curiosity. Misbahudholam et al., (2024) In “Training on the Development of Interactive Learning Media to Improve Digital Literacy and Numeracy of Elementary School Teachers in the Era of Merdeka Belajar,” revealed that literacy activities can increase students’ learning activeness. Meanwhile, Ifadhah et al., (2025) In “Management of Literacy Culture in Madrasah,” stated that literacy culture significantly contributes to students’ achievement motivation. Therefore, literacy holds strategic potential in shaping students’ character when managed creatively and sustainably.

Despite the growing body of research on literacy and character development, most previous studies tend to examine these aspects separately, such as focusing only on curiosity, activeness, or achievement motivation. In addition, many studies are conducted in elementary school settings and emphasize literacy from a cognitive perspective rather than a comprehensive character development approach. This indicates a gap in understanding how literacy activities can simultaneously develop multiple character dimensions within a specific educational context, particularly in madrasah environments. Therefore, this study offers a novelty by providing an integrated analysis of literacy activities in shaping students’ activeness, curiosity, and appreciation of achievement in a madrasah context.

Based on these considerations, it is necessary to conduct an in-depth study on how literacy activities in Grade VII at MTsN 1 Kota Sungai Penuh contribute to the development of students’ activeness, curiosity, and appreciation of achievement. This study is important not only to examine the effectiveness of literacy programs but also to identify more innovative, contextual, and effective literacy strategies in fostering students’ character in the era of modern education. This is in line with Nurhabibi et al., (2025) who emphasize that character education strategies must be adaptive to technological developments, contextual to students’ real-life experiences, and integrated with value-based learning in order to effectively shape students’ character.

Literature review

literacy activities and student engagement in madrasah education

Recent scholarship has increasingly positioned literacy activities in madrasah education as a strategic pedagogical approach to fostering active student engagement and meaningful learning in Islamic schooling contexts (Huda et al., 2021; Tan, 2023; Rahman, 2022). Literacy practices—such as reading circles, reflective writing, and text-based discussions—have been shown to enhance students' cognitive participation and deepen their understanding of both religious and general knowledge (Ismail et al., 2021; Nilan et al., 2022; Zuhdi, 2023). In madrasah settings, literacy is not limited to technical reading skills but extends to interpretive engagement with classical and contemporary texts, encouraging students to critically explore meanings and contexts (Latif, 2021; Woodward et al., 2022; Prasetyo, 2023). Empirical studies indicate that when literacy activities are integrated into daily learning routines, students demonstrate higher levels of curiosity, participation, and sustained attention in classroom interactions (Rahman, 2022; Huda et al., 2021; Tan, 2023). Furthermore, literacy-based learning environments create opportunities for dialogical interaction, where students actively construct knowledge through questioning, discussion, and collaborative inquiry (Ismail et al., 2021; Nilan et al., 2022; Zuhdi, 2023). Thus, literacy activities in madrasah education can be understood as dynamic pedagogical tools that promote not only academic achievement but also active engagement and intellectual growth (Latif, 2021; Woodward et al., 2022; Prasetyo, 2023).

At a deeper level, student engagement in literacy activities is closely linked to intrinsic motivation and curiosity, which are essential components of meaningful learning processes in Islamic education (Huda et al., 2021; Rahman, 2022; Tan, 2023). Curiosity-driven learning encourages students to explore religious texts and social realities with openness, fostering a habit of inquiry that goes beyond rote memorization (Ismail et al., 2021; Nilan et al., 2022; Zuhdi, 2023). Research also highlights that literacy activities can stimulate students' questioning abilities, enabling them to critically reflect on religious concepts and their application in contemporary contexts (Latif, 2021; Woodward et al., 2022; Prasetyo, 2023). In addition, the integration of digital literacy tools in madrasah education has expanded opportunities for interactive learning, allowing students to access diverse sources of knowledge and engage in multimodal literacy practices (Tan, 2023; Rahman, 2022; Huda et al., 2021). Such developments indicate that literacy is increasingly becoming a transformative learning process, bridging traditional Islamic scholarship with modern educational practices (Ismail et al., 2021; Nilan et al., 2022; Zuhdi, 2023). Consequently, fostering engagement and curiosity through literacy activities is essential for preparing students to navigate complex intellectual and social challenges in contemporary Muslim societies (Latif, 2021; Woodward et al., 2022; Prasetyo, 2023).

Literacy, appreciation, and character formation in madrasah contexts

Beyond cognitive development, literacy activities in madrasah education play a crucial role in shaping students' character by fostering appreciation, ethical awareness, and emotional intelligence (Huda et al., 2021; Tan, 2023; Rahman, 2022). Appreciation in literacy contexts refers to students' ability to value knowledge, respect diverse perspectives, and engage empathetically with texts and others (Ismail et al., 2021; Nilan et al., 2022; Zuhdi, 2023). Studies show that reflective reading and interpretive discussions in madrasah settings contribute to the development of moral sensitivity and ethical reasoning, which are central to Islamic character education (Latif, 2021; Woodward et al., 2022; Prasetyo, 2023). Furthermore, literacy activities that involve narrative texts, religious stories, and historical accounts enable students to internalize values such as compassion, justice, and responsibility (Huda et al., 2021; Rahman, 2022; Tan, 2023). This process aligns with the concept of *akhlaq* formation, where knowledge is integrated with ethical conduct and personal transformation (Ismail et al., 2021; Nilan et al., 2022; Zuhdi, 2023). Therefore, literacy in madrasah education serves as a bridge between intellectual development and moral cultivation, reinforcing the holistic nature of Islamic pedagogy (Latif, 2021; Woodward et al., 2022; Prasetyo, 2023).

Moreover, the role of teachers in facilitating literacy-based character formation is critical, as they guide students in interpreting texts and connecting them to real-life experiences (Huda et al., 2021; Rahman, 2022; Tan, 2023). Teachers act as mediators who shape students' appreciation

by modeling reflective thinking, respectful dialogue, and ethical interpretation of knowledge (Ismail et al., 2021; Nilan et al., 2022; Zuhdi, 2023). Research also suggests that collaborative literacy activities—such as group discussions and peer feedback—enhance students' social skills and foster a sense of mutual respect and responsibility (Latif, 2021; Woodward et al., 2022; Prasetyo, 2023). In addition, culturally responsive literacy practices that incorporate local wisdom and Islamic values contribute to the contextual relevance of character education in madrasah settings (Huda et al., 2021; Tan, 2023; Rahman, 2022). However, challenges remain in ensuring that literacy activities are systematically integrated into curricula and aligned with broader educational goals (Ismail et al., 2021; Nilan et al., 2022; Zuhdi, 2023). Thus, strengthening the role of literacy in character formation requires a comprehensive approach that combines pedagogical innovation, teacher capacity development, and institutional support (Latif, 2021; Woodward et al., 2022; Prasetyo, 2023).

Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach, as it aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the process of developing students' character in terms of activeness, curiosity, and appreciation of achievement through literacy activities in Grade VII at MTsN 1 Kota Sungai Penuh. According to Sugiyono, (2021), qualitative research is suitable for examining complex and contextual social phenomena in depth. This approach is considered appropriate because character formation and literacy activities are complex and contextual social phenomena. The research site was selected because MTsN 1 Kota Sungai Penuh, located in Jambi Province, has implemented the School Literacy Program and the Strengthening Character Education (PPK) program.

The study was conducted over a period of three months, from August to November 2025, covering the stages of preliminary observation, data collection, analysis, and verification. The research subjects were determined using a purposive sampling technique. Informants were selected based on their direct involvement in literacy activities and character development processes. Therefore, the participants in this study included literacy coordinators, subject teachers, students who were actively involved in literacy activities, and those who were less active. This technique is in line with Mulyana et al. (2024), who state that purposive sampling involves selecting informants who have the most relevant knowledge regarding the research problem.

Primary data were obtained from in-depth interviews with 1 teacher and 3 selected seventh-grade students, supported by direct classroom observation of literacy activities, and student interactions in the classroom and literacy area. Secondary data were obtained from school literacy program documents, activity archives, and visual documentation such as photographs of literacy activities. This study used three main techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner. This technique allowed researchers to explore deeper meanings, such as student motivation, activeness patterns, forms of curiosity, and achievement reward practices. Participatory observation was conducted by directly observing the implementation of literacy activities, a 15-minute reading program carried out before learning. In this activity, seventh-grade students read non-text reading materials for fifteen minutes in an orderly atmosphere, while researchers recorded the level of student involvement and the teacher's role in directing and ensuring activities ran according to procedure. In the reading corner, researchers observed how students utilized the reading space provided as part of literacy activities. Observations were conducted to observe the type of reading material selected, the frequency of student visits, the level of independence in reading, and how teachers manage and ensure the reading corner functions as a means of supporting the strengthening of literacy character. In the literacy journal, researchers observed how students recorded reading summaries, reflections, or personal responses after reading activities. Observations focused on the consistency of journal filling, the depth of understanding demonstrated by students, and the role of teachers in providing direction and feedback on these literacy notes. In book discussion and work exhibition activities, researchers observed student interactions in discussing the content of the reading and how they displayed the results of literacy creations, such as summaries. Observations were conducted to observe

interaction patterns, student activeness, and the role of teachers in providing appreciation for the process and results of activities. Observations were conducted using structured guidelines referring to Ratnaningtyas et al., (2023). Meanwhile, documentation was used as supporting data to strengthen the results of observations and interviews.

Data analysis was conducted using an interactive model (Miles, 2014), which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification. Conclusions are tentative, and their validity is continuously tested through triangulation until valid findings are obtained.

Results

The infographic, which ensues, "Literacy as Character Architecture," outlines how structured literacy programs at MTsN 1 Kota Sungai Penuh have shifted student involvement from passive consumption to proactive, all-encompassing character development. The visualization examines the development of student agency through three main pillars: increased engagement, self-generated curiosity, and an environment of respect, through reconciling qualitative behavioral changes with quantitative growth metrics. It additionally provides an assessment of institutional outcomes prior to and following implementation.

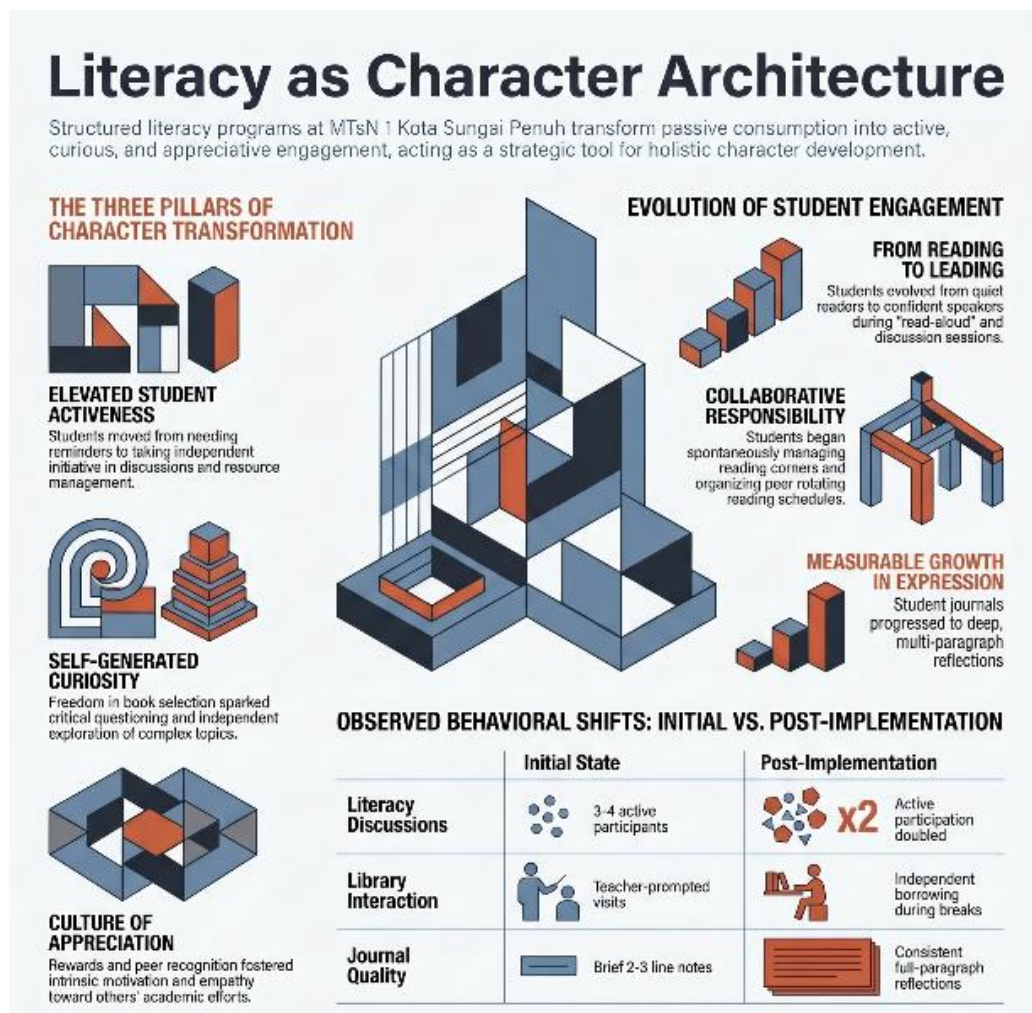


Figure 1. Correlating Literacy Engagement with Holistic Character Development: Evidence from MTsN 1 Kota Sungai Penuh

The findings indicate that students' activeness improved gradually through morning reading activities, based on observations, student engagement in morning reading activities showed changes over time. In the early weeks, many students still needed to be reminded to start reading. However, by the second month, the majority of students began to take the initiative to pick up and read books without repeated instructions. Teachers attributed this change to the

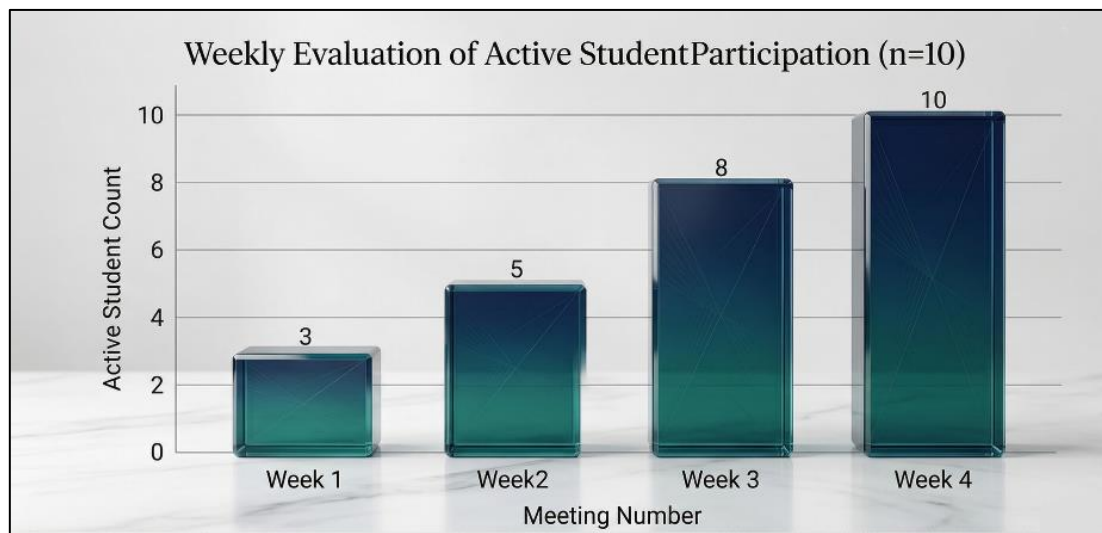
consistent implementation of the program and the enforcement of rules from the beginning, as reflected in students arriving on time, opening their books promptly, and participating in reading activities in a more orderly and focused classroom environment.



Figure 2. Literacy activities in class

The findings indicate that students' activeness increased through literacy discussions. During the literacy discussion, students demonstrated increased confidence in speaking. Initially, only three to four students actively expressed their opinions. However, after several meetings, the number of students involved nearly doubled. The teacher reported that students were becoming accustomed to the discussion pattern and were no longer shy about expressing their understanding of the reading. The discussion atmosphere became more lively. This increased confidence in discussions aligns with the findings from the read-aloud activity, which demonstrates the role of literacy as an effective means of fostering student engagement and self-confidence. The read-aloud activity also demonstrated student engagement. In several sessions, students who were typically quiet began to emerge as readers. They read with confidence, although their reading fluency still needed improvement. These findings indicate that literacy activities can gradually develop students' confidence. Students who listened also responded positively after the reading session.

Student engagement was also evident during the weekly review activities. Previously passive students began volunteering to share summaries and opinions on the books they read. Some even prepared more comprehensive reviews by jotting down key points at home. This demonstrated their self-awareness and initiative. According to Siregar et al., (2022) Reviews are an advanced literacy activity that requires analysis, reflection, and the ability to systematically organize ideas. This demonstrates that the literacy program successfully develops students' thinking skills.



Grafik 1. Increased activity of class students

The findings indicate that students' activeness is reflected in their responsibility in managing the classroom reading corner. In the classroom reading corner, students are actively taking out and returning books in an orderly manner. Some students routinely help rearrange untidy books. The teacher does not instruct this activity, but it arises from the students' own conscious effort. This demonstrates a sense of responsibility and active involvement in maintaining the school's literacy facilities



Figure 3. Reading corner in class VII

Active writing was evident in the students' literacy journals. Nearly all students filled out their journals regularly, and the quality of their writing improved each week. Initially, the journals contained only two or three lines, but they eventually expanded to full paragraphs. This demonstrated progress not only in writing skills but also in their willingness to participate actively. Students also demonstrated active participation in asking questions to the teacher about the reading material. The questions ranged from simple to more in-depth. The teacher stated that students were becoming accustomed to processing information critically. This change was particularly evident in students who had previously rarely spoken in class, now actively expressing their opinions. Student engagement was also evident when given a literacy project assignment. Students worked well together in groups. They divided tasks, determined poster designs, and prepared presentation materials. Researchers observed that students actively participated in discussions and took on their respective roles. This activity involved active thinking and collaboration. Student engagement in this project-based literacy activity was not only evident in collaboration and group discussions but also resulted in increased student initiative in accessing reading resources independently.

Students appeared to be actively borrowing books from the library. Librarians reported that borrowings increased, particularly during breaks and after school. Students came independently to find new books to read. This activity demonstrated that students' interest in reading, linked to active learning, was beginning to develop within themselves. Teachers reported that this only emerged after intensive literacy activities were implemented.



Figure 4. Enthusiasm of seventh-grade students visiting the library

In group presentations, students demonstrated performative engagement by explaining the reading material in front of the class. They appeared confident and were able to answer their peers' questions. Researchers observed that students who were typically shy began to demonstrate good speaking skills. This engagement is one indicator of the success of the literacy program. The engagement that emerged in formal classroom situations was also reflected in student behavior outside of learning activities. During classroom learning activities, students actively exchange books with each other outside of class. This activity occurs spontaneously without teacher involvement. They recommend books they find interesting to one another. This informal activity demonstrates that literacy has become a vibrant culture among students. This growing culture of literacy is also reflected in the way students collaborate during reading activities.

In small group reading activities, students share roles when reading sections of the text. They take the initiative to create a rotating reading schedule so that everyone has equal opportunities. This demonstrates good self-regulation skills and active participation in the learning process. The active participation fostered through these reading activities is evident in the evaluation of student learning outcomes. During the assessment, students appeared enthusiastic about revising their work after receiving feedback. The teacher explained that their enthusiasm for improving their work increased with the literacy routine. Students began to realize that reading and writing require consistent effort.

Research has found that students' curiosity increases when they are allowed to choose books based on their interests. Students explore new titles and ask teachers for reading recommendations. They appear enthusiastic when choosing books, indicating a desire to explore more. Teachers report that students often inquire about the genre and content of a book before checking it out. During group reading activities, students frequently ask questions about the meaning of unfamiliar terms or difficult sentences. They demonstrate a desire to deeply understand the content of the reading. Researchers noted that students even looked up words in digital dictionaries when the teacher didn't have time to explain. This demonstrates that their curiosity is self-generated. Curiosity was also evident when students were asked to generate questions related to the reading. Students generated a variety of questions, ranging from basic facts to analytical questions. Teachers reported that the quality of the questions improved week by week. Students became more thorough and critical in their reading.

When reading about culture, students asked questions about the traditions and customs of the people depicted in the stories. They wanted to learn more about the cultural background. Researchers observed that students enthusiastically compared information from the readings with their own experiences at home. In scientific readings, students demonstrated curiosity about scientific concepts they didn't yet understand. They asked questions about how the scientific phenomena described in the texts work. This demonstrates that literacy activities not only foster reading interest but also spark academic curiosity. During book reviews, students are curious about each other's opinions about the same book. They compare interpretations and ask each other why they chose their favorite passages. This demonstrates interpersonal curiosity. The curiosity fostered through student-to-student discussions further fuels their enthusiasm for new books.

When a new book arrives at the library, students immediately approach it without being asked. They open the pages one by one and read the synopsis. The librarian explained that the arrival of a new book is always the busiest time. Curiosity is also evident in informal student-teacher interviews. Students ask about their teachers' experiences reading similar books. They seem eager to learn more perspectives on specific readings. Students' curiosity is evident not only in exploring books and asking questions of teachers, but also in processing the reading content into visual and conceptual forms. Researchers found that rewards in literacy activities had a positive impact on student attitudes. Teachers offered simple praise such as "good," "great," or "continue" to students who completed reading. Students appeared happy and became more motivated to participate. During the review activity, students responded positively to their peers who shared their reading. They applauded and provided constructive comments. Teachers reported that this atmosphere made students feel valued and encouraged them to try harder.

The "Most Active Reader" program encourages students to compete to read the most books in a week. When their names are announced, students show pride and show off small certificates given by their teachers. This motivates other students to improve their reading habits. Students appreciate the work of their peers displayed on the school bulletin board. They read the work and provide positive comments. Researchers observed that students are beginning to respect each other's abilities. At the literacy exhibition, students displayed their writing and posters. Many students helped organize their peers' work without being asked. This demonstrated their appreciation for their peers' process and effort. Teachers provided written feedback in students' literacy journals. Students appeared pleased to see the motivational notes in their notebooks. This fostered confidence and a desire to write better.

Students who did not receive awards remained positive. They expressed their desire to try again the following week. Teachers praised their efforts, even though they had not yet achieved

the best results. In group discussions, students praised each other for answering questions correctly. They appeared to value the abilities of each group member. Through this mutual respect within the group, students demonstrated greater concern for their peers' conditions and feelings. For example, students provided moral support to peers who lacked confidence in reading aloud. They said, "I can do it," or "just take it slow." This finding demonstrates achievement empathy. When a peer won a literacy competition at school, other students congratulated them. They listened enthusiastically to the winner's work. Teachers conveyed that this social recognition was very positive.

Discussion

Student presence and activeness

According to education experts, student engagement is an important indicator in the learning process, demonstrating their mental, emotional, and behavioral involvement (Mohamad Miftah & Syamsurijal, 2024; Tambak et al., 2025). Engagement is not only characterized by students' physical presence in class but also by their active participation in learning activities, such as reading, asking questions, and responding to learning materials. In the context of literacy-based learning, student engagement is seen as a result of a learning environment that provides space for participation and opportunities to interact with texts and ideas. Constructivist learning theory emphasizes that students will be more active when they are directly involved in meaningful learning processes. Therefore, literacy activities have great potential to encourage student engagement through the habit of reading and involvement in ongoing learning activities. This shows that literacy activities implemented routinely in class VII MTsN 1 Kota Sungai Penuh are related to the gradual growth of student activity. At the beginning of the implementation, most students still appeared passive and needed teacher guidance. However, along with the habituation process, students began to show initiative to read and engage in class activities. This finding is in line with the opinion of Sartono (2025) who stated that active student involvement grows when literacy activities are carried out consistently and repeatedly in an atmosphere that supports student development.

Reading aloud activities are an effective means of fostering self-confidence. Previously quiet students, as seen in the initial stages of observing reading aloud activities, began to gain the courage to speak and practice intonation while reading. According to Hamdi & Jumrodah (2023), reading aloud can reduce speaking anxiety and increase the courage to speak. This process is important in developing self-confidence, which is part of the goal of character education. Students' curiosity also experienced significant development. They actively asked questions about new terms, the context of the story, and the implied meanings in the reading. This questioning activity demonstrated strong cognitive curiosity. According to reports, curiosity emerged when students were given space to explore the text's content in depth. Teachers successfully facilitated this by responding to each question with open explanations. These positive changes in courage and curiosity accompanied an increase in students' active participation in the various literacy activities they participated in each week.

Changes in student activity were also evident in the increased courage of students when participating in book discussions. A conducive classroom atmosphere made students more comfortable expressing their opinions. This is in line with the theory of Parisu, & Kasmawati (2025) which emphasizes that a safe learning environment can increase student verbal engagement. Weekly review activities become an important space for students to express their understanding of the reading. Their courage to convey summaries and opinions in front of the class is an indicator of the development of cognitive and performative activity. In addition to being seen in discussion and review activities, increased student activity is also seen in how they utilize the literacy facilities available in the classroom, especially the class reading corner.

Student involvement in managing the reading corner indicates that active participation has evolved into social responsibility. Rif'ah (2022) explains that participation in maintaining literacy resources reflects growing collective concern. The fact that students tidied up books without instruction demonstrates that literacy is not only understood as a personal activity but also as an activity that builds order in the classroom community. As students increase their involvement in

collaborative literacy activities, positive impacts are also seen in productive aspects, particularly writing.

Curiosity: the drive to dive in and explore

Freedom to choose books is a crucial factor in fostering curiosity. Students appear more enthusiastic about exploring books when given the autonomy to choose reading material based on their interests. This aligns with Tarigan et al., (2025) The theory of intrinsic motivation, which states that personal choice increases curiosity and emotional engagement in reading activities. This phenomenon is evident when students actively seek out new books without being instructed. This fostered curiosity is not only evident during the reading selection stage but also continues throughout the group reading process. Students' curiosity was not limited to the content of the reading but also extended to seeking additional information. Some students sought further explanations online regarding the topics they read. This finding aligns with Subekti et al., (2024) finding that digital literacy broadens students' exploration. This activity demonstrates that students are beginning to utilize technology to deepen their understanding. Interpersonal curiosity was also evident when students asked each other questions and compared opinions regarding the reading content. They discussed the characters, conflicts, and moral messages in the books. This interaction supports Sari et al., (2024) finding that communication between students plays a role in enriching literacy understanding. This process fosters the ability to argue and appreciate others' perspectives.

Students demonstrated curiosity about characters and storylines in fictional reading. They frequently asked, "Why did this character do that?" or "What happened next?" Teachers noted that students were becoming more critical in assessing storylines. This was evident when students who read biographies inquired more deeply about the characters. They asked about the characters' real lives and compared them to the content of the books. Researchers noted that some students searched for photos or videos of the characters online. Students' interest in nonfiction books also increased. They asked about text structure and the purpose of writing. Some students expressed interest in reading more books on environmental, economic, or health themes. Students' curiosity about book content did not stop at individual understanding, but continued with a desire to share and compare understanding with friends.

In the concept mapping task, students demonstrated curiosity as they attempted to discover relationships between ideas. They inquired about the reasons why one important idea was mapped more prominently than another. The students' curiosity, fostered through the concept mapping activity, was further strengthened by providing prompting questions before reading. When the teacher asked prompting questions before reading, students enthusiastically responded and anticipated the information they would discover in the reading. Their curiosity was piqued by predicting the text's content.

Awards: when achievements are appreciated and embraced

Rewards are a crucial aspect in strengthening the sustainability of literacy activities. Simple praise from teachers has been shown to increase students' motivation to continue reading. This aligns with the positive reinforcement theory proposed by Al Rasyid et al., (2025), which explains that verbal appreciation can increase intrinsic motivation. Students feel appreciated and want to demonstrate greater effort in subsequent activities. The intrinsic motivation that grows through these rewards is evident when students read and participate in literacy activities not solely because of external demands or rewards, but rather because of an internal drive. Feeling appreciated makes students feel a sense of personal satisfaction with the reading and writing process, thus encouraging them to engage voluntarily and sustainably. This demonstrates that consistent rewards can strengthen students' interest in learning and foster awareness that literacy activities have value for their personal development. Teacher appreciation is not only verbal but also manifested in literacy programs that involve all students.

Peer appreciation during review activities creates a culture of mutual respect. Applause and positive comments boost readers' self-confidence. Darmayanti et al., (2024) stated that social support plays a significant role in developing a character that values achievement. These findings indicate that literacy activities not only develop academic abilities but also social relationships

among students. The "Most Active Reader" program has proven to be an effective strategy in increasing student motivation. Weekly awards make students feel that their efforts are recognized. According to Fitriani, (2024) periodic awards can build sustainable good habits; this is evident in the increasing number of students borrowing books each week. The mutual respect fostered through review activities and award programs is then evident in the exhibition of students' literary work.

This is also evident when students demonstrate appreciation for their own achievements by keeping their journals neat. They feel proud when showing their journals to their teachers. Students appear to appreciate the teacher's assessment process for literacy assignments. They accept feedback well and correct mistakes without showing any objections. During reflection activities, several students expressed that small rewards encourage them to continue learning. They feel that every effort is appreciated by both the teacher and their peers. This atmosphere of mutual respect is also evident during group presentations. Students listen attentively and do not interrupt their peers while they are presenting.

Conclusion

Literacy activities in grade VII of MTsN 1 Kota Sungai Penuh have been shown to significantly contribute to strengthening students' character, particularly in the aspects of activeness, curiosity, and appreciation of achievement. The findings reveal that structured literacy practices encourage students to actively engage in reading, discussions and participation in literacy-based classroom activities such as managing reading corners and presenting their work. Students' curiosity develops through opportunities to select reading materials independently, generate questions, seek additional information, and engage in peer discussions, which fosters critical and autonomous learning. Furthermore, appreciation in the form of teacher and peer recognition, and positive reinforcement enhances students' intrinsic motivation, self-confidence, and respect for both individual and collective achievements. Overall, these findings indicate that literacy activities not only improve reading skills but also create an interactive, exploratory, and appreciative learning environment that supports holistic character development. This study offers a novelty by providing an integrated perspective on how literacy activities simultaneously foster multiple dimensions of character activeness, curiosity, and appreciation of achievement within the madrasah context. Unlike previous studies that tend to examine these aspects separately or focus primarily on cognitive outcomes, this research highlights literacy as a holistic and practical strategy for character education through real classroom implementation. However, this study is not without limitations, as it is limited to a single madrasah context and focuses only on grade VII students, which may affect the transferability of the findings. In addition, the study primarily emphasizes qualitative insights, so further research is recommended to explore broader contexts and deeper interpretations in different educational settings. The implications of this research suggest that literacy programs should be designed not only as academic activities but also as strategic tools for character development. Schools, particularly madrasahs, are encouraged to implement sustainable, creative, and student-centered literacy practices that provide space for active participation, critical thinking, and appreciation. Future research is also recommended to develop more contextual and innovative literacy models to strengthen character education across diverse educational environments

Declarations

Author contribution statement

First author, contributed as the lead author by designing the overall research concept, developing the theoretical framework, conducting data collection through in-depth interviews, analyzing the data, and drafting the article from the initial version to the final version. **Second author** contributed to the development of the phenomenological research methodology framework, assisted in the data validation process through member checking, and conducted a critical review of the consistency of the resulting thematic analysis.

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Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study consist of transcripts of in-depth interviews with participants. Given the highly sensitive nature of the data and its relation to the privacy of individuals belonging to a vulnerable population, the raw data cannot be publicly released to maintain the confidentiality and protect the identities of the participants, as agreed upon in the informed consent form. Data are available on a limited basis and may be accessed upon request submitted directly to the corresponding author, accompanied by a clear academic justification. Each request for access will be considered based on the appropriateness of the intended use and compliance with applicable research ethics principles.

Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper

Declaration of use artificial intelligence

The authors declare that artificial intelligence (AI) was used only to a limited extent in this study, specifically during the formulation and refinement of the research methodology to align with the phenomenological theme and approach employed. The entire process of data collection, thematic analysis, interpretation of findings, and development of scientific arguments was conducted entirely by the authors. The use of artificial intelligence did not affect the substance of the data or the conclusions drawn in this study.

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