

Developing the Character of Elementary School Students Through Values-Based Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Formal educational institutions play a pivotal role in shaping student character, which extends beyond individual development to influence the broader educational environment. Building strong character is essential for preparing students to navigate societal trends and challenges. School leadership is a critical determinant of the success or failure of character development initiatives. This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design to explore the role of leadership in character development. The research was conducted at an integrated Islamic school in Majalengka, involving principals and teachers as respondents. Data collection focused on observing leadership practices and their impact on student character formation. The findings demonstrate that values-based leadership significantly contributes to developing student character. Key leadership values identified include leading by example, fostering kinship, promoting cooperation, and practicing visionary leadership. These values collectively create an environment that supports character education and enhances the school's role in preparing students for future challenges. The results emphasize that effective leadership is foundational to embedding character-building practices in formal education. Values-based leadership not only strengthens student character but also fosters a positive and collaborative school culture. These insights align with the need for leadership models that prioritize ethical and relational practices. This study highlights the importance of values-based leadership in character development within schools. Future research should explore its application in diverse educational contexts to refine strategies for cultivating ethical and responsible future generations.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Schools, as formal educational institutions, bear a significant responsibility for shaping and fostering student character. Character building is not confined to the individual level but is deeply embedded within the culture and practices of the educational institution itself. A school devoid of character cannot effectively cultivate it in its students. As emphasized by Ansori (2020), education oriented toward character development is essential to nurture and uphold the noble qualities of humanity. This focus is critical in ensuring that humans, as the highest and most dignified beings, do not deviate from their moral and ethical essence. In this context, schools must embody and promote values that strengthen character development, preparing students to navigate complex societal challenges with integrity and humanity.

To realize these ideals, a leader or principal is needed who has the ability to mobilize, guide and direct the people under him to follow the rules that have been agreed upon in the organization. A leader should have more abilities, for example, in organizing and directing, and be able to be a role model in his organization. Leadership in schools so strongly influences organizational performance that it makes sense that one of the school's declines is caused by the performance of leaders who cannot adapt to the values that serve as guidelines.

Leadership plays a pivotal role in the success of student character development in schools. Research underscores that the school principal is a key determinant in the effectiveness of character education efforts. According to Berkowitz and Bier (2005), leadership is a primary factor in the success or failure of character education initiatives. Moreover, Ghamrawi, Ghamrawi, and Shal (2015) highlight that the involvement of leadership is the strongest distinguishing factor in the implementation of character development programs, emphasizing the need for active and committed leaders. Leadership is further estimated to account for approximately a quarter of the total school effect, underscoring its significance in shaping school culture and outcomes.

Lickona (2012) adds that leadership is instrumental in creating a moral culture within schools, where positive values, attitudes, and behaviors can thrive. Effective leaders inspire and model ethical practices, embedding moral principles into the school environment and fostering a culture of mutual respect and collaboration. This influence extends to all aspects of school life, from classroom interactions to extracurricular activities, ensuring that character development is a holistic and integrated process.

The principal's role goes beyond administrative tasks; it involves shaping an educational ecosystem that prioritizes character as much as academic achievement. This requires not only a vision for moral excellence but also the ability to engage teachers, students, and the community in meaningful character-building initiatives. As such, leadership rooted in strong values becomes a transformative force, equipping students with the moral foundation needed to navigate challenges and contribute positively to society.

Leadership serves as a cornerstone for character education within schools, yet challenges persist in its effective implementation. In practice, some school principals exhibit behaviors unfit for emulation, such as arrogance, lack of transparency in managing operational costs, and unilateral decision-making without involving relevant stakeholders. These actions reflect a gap in the understanding and application of sound leadership principles. Data from the Ministry of Education and Culture further highlight this issue, revealing that 230,029 out of 311,933 school principals have not yet obtained competency certificates, with only 81,904 certified by the Institute for Development and Empowerment of School Principals (LP2KS) (Seftiawan, 2013). This indicates that merely 26% of school principals meet the required professional standards. The prevalence of uncertified and inadequately trained principals underscores a critical need to improve leadership qualifications and integrity in schools. Addressing this issue is essential to fostering a more effective and ethical educational environment that can drive progress and support holistic student development.

The critical role of school principals in shaping human resources highlights the strategic importance of leadership in education. Despite this, challenges in student character development

persist. Reports from 2011 to 2019 document 37,381 complaints of violence against children, 2,473 instances of bullying (both in schools and on social media), and 7,400 elementary school children exposed to drugs (KPAI, 2020). These alarming statistics point to a growing need for effective character education, underscoring a gap in the existing efforts to balance academic excellence with moral development. While numerous studies focus on the academic achievements of students, few comprehensively address the integration of values-based leadership in character formation as a primary focus in elementary education.

The academic community at Insan Rabbani Integrated Islamic Elementary School (SDIT) recognizes the urgency of this issue. The school emphasizes that weak character makes students susceptible to deviant behaviors, stressing the necessity of instilling strong moral foundations aligned with the Pancasila Student Profile. The Pancasila Student Profile serves as a national strategy to improve education quality by prioritizing character development, aiming to produce students who are moral, adaptive, and socially responsible amidst the rapid technological advancements of today's world.

This research introduces a novel focus on values-based leadership as a critical approach to developing student character. By embedding values and norms into leadership practices, principals can foster a holistic educational environment that integrates academic rigor with moral integrity. The study aims to bridge the research gap by exploring how values-based leadership can strengthen character education in elementary schools, ultimately preparing students to navigate global challenges with integrity and social responsibility. The findings are expected to contribute significantly to educational leadership strategies and inform the development of character-building frameworks in the Indonesian context.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore and interpret the values embodied by school principals in developing student character. This method focuses on understanding and interpreting the perspectives, behaviors, and strategies employed by educational leaders to cultivate character within their schools. It emphasizes an interpretive analysis of the collected data without relying on quantification or statistical calculations, as highlighted by Beech (2000). By focusing on descriptive methods, the research aims to provide a detailed narrative of the leadership practices and their impact on character education.

Data collection primarily utilized library research, which involves analyzing relevant theoretical studies and literature on values, culture, and norms within the educational context. Literature studies are integral to this research as they provide a foundation for understanding prior findings and frameworks related to values-based leadership and character development. This ensures that the study is informed by existing knowledge and grounded in scholarly insights.

The research was conducted at an integrated Islamic school in Majalengka, with respondents including the school principal and three teachers—a guidance and counseling teacher and a religious and character education teacher. Observations and interviews served as the primary research instruments. Observations focused on analyzing the principal's policies and actions in fostering student character through values-based leadership. Interviews with teachers provided insights into their involvement and experiences in implementing character-building programs, exploring their roles in supporting the principal's vision. This multifaceted approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of how values-based leadership contributes to character development in an educational setting.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Elementary schools are recognized as having an important role in developing student character. On that basis, all educational activities must be able to facilitate the cultivation and development of

students' character. Several expert opinions convey the importance of basic education in character formation as stated by Freud that basic education is the key in forming a child's personality, failure to cultivate a personality will form a destructive and problematic person (Dwairy, 2002). The success of teachers in guiding and overcoming various character problems in basic education also determines children's success in their future lives. Therefore, it is necessary to form and develop quality character as early as possible, because this age is an important period for the formation of a person's character (Sinaga, 2018). Instilling character values from an early age is a very important process in forming the foundations of human personality (Tanto, Hapidin, & Supena, 2019). So failure to internalize moral values at that age will have a negative impact on the child's future moral life (Wismaliya, Hakam, & Agustin, 2018). Early education is a very appropriate phase for personality formation to then instill good values in children from an early age (Esih, 2020; Hambal, 2020; Karmini, 2022; Retnaningrum, 2019).

On this basis, leadership has a very important role in developing student character. The results of interviews with SDIT principal Insan Rabbani show that leadership factors have a very important role in building character education. A good leader is not only able to influence, provide guidance, organize and control other people, but how every activity at school has a content that is full of values, this will be realized if leadership at school in practice prioritizes good moral principles in interacting and carrying out activities. tasks or in making decisions.

The academic community of SDIT Insan Rabbani recognizes the critical importance of character education for students, particularly in the context of rapid advancements in science and technology. These developments, while offering numerous benefits, also pose significant challenges that require careful navigation. The school aspires to cultivate students with strong character to serve as a counterbalance to the potential negative impacts of technological progress. Character education is seen not only as a way to build moral resilience but also as a foundation for preparing students to contribute positively to society.

To achieve this vision, SDIT Insan Rabbani emphasizes the cultivation of specific core values. Discipline and honesty are prioritized as essential qualities for fostering integrity and responsibility in both academic and personal endeavors. Students are encouraged to communicate truthfully and respectfully, ensuring that their words reflect ethical standards. Maintaining personal and environmental hygiene is also emphasized, promoting a sense of responsibility toward oneself and the community.

The school places significant importance on diligence and obedience in worship, highlighting the role of spiritual values in character formation. Respect for parents, teachers, siblings, and others is nurtured as a cornerstone of interpersonal relationships, fostering empathy and social harmony. Politeness and courteous behavior are integral, creating an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding within the school community. Additionally, students are taught to respect the opinions and beliefs of others, cultivating tolerance and appreciation for diversity.

By embedding these values into its educational framework, SDIT Insan Rabbani seeks to prepare students not only for academic success but also for ethical and socially responsible leadership in an increasingly complex world.

Some results of interviews with teachers:

We at SDIT Insan Rabbani are well aware that developments in science and technology have a big impact on children's thinking patterns and behavior. Even though there are many positive things that can be obtained, it cannot be denied that there are negative impacts that arise, such as a decrease in communication ethics or a lack of respect for other people. Therefore, character education is our priority to help students become balanced individuals. We want them to have strong character, not only excel academically but also have good morals.

Implementation of these values is carried out in various ways, such as daily habits, integration in learning, and extracurricular activities. For example, we always start the day with prayer together and memorizing short verses to instill the habit of worship. To maintain cleanliness, there is a class picket schedule supervised by the teacher. Meanwhile, in learning, we often relate the material to examples of character values, such as honesty and respect. Activities outside the classroom, such as community service and the "Smile and Greet" program, are also designed to support this character formation.

The effectiveness of character cultivation in schools relies heavily on leaders who prioritize and embody moral principles in their practice. According to Sergiovanni (1981), moral leadership is characterized by consistency between a leader's beliefs, words, attitudes, and actions. This alignment fosters integrity, enabling leaders to project a strong, respected, and charismatic personality that inspires others. Leaders who demonstrate such moral leadership serve as role models, earning admiration and trust from their communities.

Observations and interviews with school principals revealed key values integral to their role in fostering student character. These values include exemplary behavior, kinship, cooperation, and visionary leadership. Exemplary behavior involves modeling the qualities they wish to instill in students, while kinship emphasizes building a sense of familial connection and mutual respect within the school community. Cooperation focuses on fostering teamwork and collaboration among staff and students, and visionary leadership involves guiding the school with a forward-thinking approach that integrates character development into its long-term goals.

Each of these values plays a critical role in creating an environment conducive to character building. The following sections will explore these values in greater detail, illustrating how they are applied in practice to cultivate student character and enhance the overall educational experience.

3.1 Exemplary

An example is an important educational factor because in humans, especially children, there is an instinct to imitate the people closest to them in the school environment. According to the principal, he is an example in the eyes of his students, so whether they realize it or not, children will tend to imitate him or the adults around him, such as the way they speak, the way they dress or their behavior. According to (Hakam, 2016a) exemplification is the initial stage, which means that anyone must learn morals and character through modeling, and in following an example, an exemplary figure is needed, the school principal is required to be a role model and a person who displays moral values.

Exemplary behavior is not only taught, but must be carried out in the form of habituation, understanding, example and continuous implementation, until finally the meaning of a character value is discovered (Suryadi, 2014). Exemplification as a method of character education can be used to identify the factors that cause good or bad a person's character (Banks, 1993). For example, if students do not have the character of caring about the environment, then it can be ascertained that one of the reasons is that the teacher as an educator also does not have that character. Exemplification is urgently needed as an educational method because it has a *naqli* foundation, namely the Koran and hadith. Naqli's evidence regarding example is found in the Qur'an, surah al-Ahzab verse 21, which states that in fact, there was a good example in the Prophet.

"Indeed, there is (in) the Messenger of Allah a good role model for you (namely) for those who hope for (the mercy of) Allah and (the coming of) the Day of Judgment, and he mentions Allah a lot" (Q.S. Al-Ahzab, 33: 21).

The ideal role model is the Prophet Muhammad, and one ideal level below him are the companions. The ideal is Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him. as a role model for all mankind is because he is the most perfect person among all humans, even among the prophets. This perfection is not only in physical form, but also in morals until Allah swt. said in the Qur'an, chapter al-Qalam, verse

4, which is the essence of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. have noble morals. "And indeed you are truly of great character" (Q.S. Al-Qalam, 68: 4).

Exemplary behavior is a vital aspect of leadership in schools, as it sets the standard for attitudes and actions within the educational environment. Through consistent and intensive coaching, leaders must embody the principle of aligning words with actions, ensuring their behavior reflects the values they seek to instill. As Munawwaroh (2019) emphasizes, a leader's personality significantly influences character development. Leaders who consistently model integrity and moral behavior provide a powerful example for their subordinates and students alike.

This influence is particularly impactful in educational settings, where humans, especially students, are naturally inclined to imitate. Students often observe and emulate the personality and actions of their leaders, using them as a guide in forming their own character. The personal integrity and character of a leader thus serve as a cornerstone for cultivating a positive and ethical school culture, making exemplary behavior a fundamental responsibility of leadership. By prioritizing role-modeling, school leaders can inspire students and staff to embody the values essential for personal and collective growth.

3.2 Family Values

Another value that the school principal plays in leading is family values. According to him, with family values good relationships will be created between teachers, because interpersonal relationships between teachers at school can influence the quality of teacher performance. An atmosphere full of family values can improve optimal work mechanisms, can even increase the professionalism of teachers collectively, and in this way, it will foster a sense of shared destiny, helping each other, and having a sense of responsibility.

The importance of family values conveys that intimate relationships, full of family, apart from rigid formalities and autocratic procedures, positively influence educators' work morale. Kinship and closeness, accompanied by relationships between teachers, are important conditions that must be sought by various parties, especially school principals. The family values that are formed make relationships between school members at SDIT Insan Rabbani better, family values will give birth to the principle of togetherness so that the atmosphere at school is always warm and an inner relationship is created between school members. This is one of the best ways to prevent inappropriate student behavior that easily develops. So if family ties at school are weak and positive norms are not heeded, it is very easy for students to commit dishonorable actions.

According to (Lickona, 2012), family values will foster a sense of the same destiny and responsibility, helping each other, congratulating friends who have good luck, empathizing with friends who experience misfortune, or hear complaints. A sense of family can be fostered through extracurricular activities, or other activities that can foster a feeling of being lucky for being part of a large school family. School activities such as sports competitions, arts competitions, environmental cleanup competitions, business activities, and work at school in the form of extracurricular activities can strengthen the sense of family. Family values between school members were created to foster a spirit of collegiality, exchange ideas, exchange the best experiences (*best practice*), as well as helping each other in solving student learning problems.

3.3 The value of cooperation

Humans are social creatures. As social creatures, humans live interdependently and need each other. No human being is able to live and fulfill his own needs. For this reason, the value of cooperation is the school's efforts to collaborate with other institutions to improve and broaden insights that have so far been lacking from related agencies. Collaboration is also useful for schools to improve the skills of students and teachers so that in the future it will be competitive for graduates to take part in society.

Collaboration between school stakeholders and external institutions is essential for effectively managing the development of students' character. This collaborative effort not only lightens the

workload but also streamlines coordination, implementation, monitoring, supervision, and evaluation processes. A conducive school atmosphere that supports character development can be achieved through a variety of collaborative initiatives.

Collaboration between school principals, teachers, and educational staff is fundamental to strengthening the planning and execution of activity programs. All elements of school management must work cohesively, sharing a common understanding and striving toward the established goals. Similarly, collaboration between extracurricular supervisors and students is vital to instilling a sense of ownership in students, positioning them as key contributors to fostering a positive and harmonious school environment.

The involvement of parents and the school committee is equally important. Through active collaboration, parents can motivate their children to participate fully in school activities and reinforce these values within the family and community. Furthermore, partnerships with community leaders and local residents are necessary to create a safe and conducive school environment, free from threats such as drug trafficking, crime, and other negative influences.

Engaging with external institutions is also crucial for enhancing and expanding the knowledge base, enabling schools to develop and implement innovative programs. Such partnerships help identify strengths and address weaknesses, ensuring that the school's initiatives are comprehensive and effective. Through these collaborative efforts, schools can create a robust support system that enhances character education and contributes to overall student success.

The explanation above highlights the critical importance of collaboration among all school stakeholders—school committees, principals, teachers, educational staff, parents, and external institutions—in implementing and managing character development. This cooperation is essential for achieving the shared goal of delivering high-quality education. When collaboration is strong, it fosters a harmonious school atmosphere and enhances the effectiveness of character education initiatives. Conversely, the absence of quality learning, a lack of harmony, or weak collaboration among school elements can significantly hinder the achievement of educational objectives.

Effective collaboration within an organization, such as a school, is vital for creating a conducive environment where all members feel valued and respected. It ensures that their ideas and contributions are acknowledged and integrated into school activities, promoting a sense of ownership and collective responsibility. By fostering mutual respect and open communication, schools can build a positive culture that supports not only academic excellence but also the holistic development of students. Such an environment is crucial for character education, as it models the values of cooperation, respect, and inclusivity that schools aim to instill in their students.

Collaboration is important because it can provide benefits for an organization and have a good influence on its members. Collaboration can increase productivity compared to working alone. With cooperation, harmony in relationships between people, between groups and between organizations can be created. Good cooperation can provide benefits for all members of the organization. In QS al-Ma'idah Allah swt. encourage cooperation without limiting the subject of cooperation. This means that cooperation is permitted with anyone, both Muslims and non-Muslims as long as it is based on the basic principles of cooperation, namely: "*and help each other in doing good deeds and piety, and do not help each other in committing sins and transgressions.*" The principle of cooperation is virtue (*al-birr*) and piety (*al-taqwa*). Al-birr which is usually translated as goodness has the same letters as *al-barr* which means land. Oceans and land represent vastness (*tawassu*). For *al-Birr* is breadth in doing or giving good (*al-khayr*)

3.4 Visionary Leadership

Visionary leadership is characterized by a forward-looking approach that focuses on achieving future-oriented goals. According to Sashkin and Sashkin (1990) and Smith (2003), visionary leadership encompasses behaviors and traits such as effective communication, trust-building, attentiveness, fostering opportunities, self-confidence, empowerment, and cultivating a strong organizational culture.

This leadership style empowers individuals to work collaboratively toward shared goals, fostering a sense of unity and purpose across the organization. By promoting high levels of identification with the leader's vision, visionary leadership inspires followers to adopt similar forward-thinking behaviors.

Komalasari (2009) defines visionary leadership as the ability to create, formulate, communicate, and implement ideal ideas, either originating from the leader or emerging from social interactions within the organization. These ideals represent the future aspirations of the organization and are achieved through the collective commitment of all personnel. Visionary leaders effectively guide their teams toward shared dreams, ensuring that the process has a positive impact on the emotional climate of the organization. This leadership style is particularly valuable when change is needed, whether to establish a new vision or to realign an existing one (Daş, Yüksel, & Beşir, 2022; Igwe, von Stamm, & Etcheberry, 2020; Marlia et al., 2020).

In essence, visionary leadership is essential for navigating organizational change, fostering innovation, and inspiring collective action. By aligning individuals with a compelling vision for the future, visionary leaders drive progress and create a culture of collaboration and commitment that enables organizations to thrive in dynamic environments.

The vision for the school is the value that is the basis for the organization, the vision is the formation of every personal value that accumulates in the form of organizational values. The organizational vision is developed by involving all members of the organization, not just the wishes of the leader or group. Personal values based on universal values are the foundation of the organization's vision, morals and ethics inherent in the organization are an absolute requirement for building a school with character.

Schools with strong character share several defining traits, one of the most critical being effective leadership. The principal's leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping students' behavior to align with established norms and standards. According to Lickona (1991), schools that foster a healthy moral environment and implement effective teaching programs often have leaders who embody and promote high moral values. These leaders act as role models, ensuring that their decisions and actions are grounded in ethical principles. Leadership, at its core, is about making value-driven choices, as it is an activity inherently tied to values. A leader must uphold strong principles because values serve as benchmarks for determining what is meaningful, appropriate, and desirable.

Values also provide guidance on assessing actions, objects, ideas, or behaviors as good or bad, as highlighted by Hakam (2016). For a school leader, the most critical standard is the moral framework that informs decisions about what actions are valuable or inappropriate. Fullan (2003) supports this view, emphasizing that effective leadership is about inspiring others to work towards meaningful shared goals. In the context of character education, principals must base their leadership on moral values such as honesty, justice, and responsibility to cultivate a positive school culture.

Sergiovanni (2007) similarly argues that value-based leadership is essential for fostering a strong school community. School leaders must strike a balance between academic excellence and character formation by modeling ethical behavior and aligning decisions with moral principles. This creates an environment where students not only excel academically but also gain valuable moral experiences that shape their character. Through consistent, value-driven leadership, principals can build a school culture where character education is integral and impactful.

4. CONCLUSION

Character development is not confined to individual students but is also deeply embedded in the educational institution itself. A school devoid of character cannot effectively cultivate character in its students. In institutions with strong character, values-based leadership ensures that every interaction becomes an opportunity for values education. The loss of these critical moments diminishes the ability to internalize and instill values in students. This study highlights the pivotal role of values-based

leadership in fostering a school culture where moral values are seamlessly integrated into all aspects of educational practice.

The findings suggest that policy recommendations should focus on strengthening values-based leadership, particularly through training programs for school principals. These programs should emphasize creating a school culture where moral values are central to policies and practices. Furthermore, character education should be integrated into the curriculum through thematic approaches, experiential learning activities, and teaching strategies that prioritize students' moral development. Teachers need to be trained to recognize and utilize daily interactions as opportunities for values education, modeling moral behavior through their actions and attitudes.

The school environment itself must support character education, with clear norms and rules reflecting moral values and active collaboration among school staff, parents, and the community to ensure alignment between values taught at school and practiced at home. However, this study is limited by its focus on a specific educational context, which may affect the generalizability of its findings. Future research should explore the application of values-based leadership across diverse educational settings and examine its long-term impact on both student character development and institutional culture.

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