

Principal's Strategy in Improving the Character of Students Through Religious Activities at Islamic High School Malang

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the principal's leadership strategy in improving the religious character of students through religious activities at SMA Islam Malang. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design, where data is collected through interviews, observations, and documentation, then validated using triangulation of sources and techniques. The results of the study show that school principals implement three main strategies, namely exemplification through direct involvement in religious activities, empowerment of teachers and students in the planning and implementation of religious programs, and routine evaluation of the implementation of religious activities. The strategy has been proven to increase students' discipline, participation, and spiritual motivation, although obstacles such as lack of discipline among some students and limited facilities are still found. The findings of this study confirm that value-based and exemplary leadership has an important role in shaping the religious character of students and contributing to the development of character education practices in schools.

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INTRODUCTION

Character education is a global issue that is increasingly emerging in the midst of a moral crisis of the younger generation. In many countries, schools are seen as the main arena in shaping students' behaviors, values, and identities to be able to face the challenges of the 21st century (Fitri Nur Hayati & Susatya, 2020). Globalization, the rapid flow of information, and socio-cultural transformation require schools to be more active in fostering student character through a systematic approach. In the Indonesian context, character education is not only a moral agenda, but also a strategic policy of the government. The implementation of Strengthening Character Education (PPK) emphasizes that schools must integrate moral, social, and spiritual values in every educational activity. In the midst of religious and cultural diversity, religious activities in schools have proven to be an effective vehicle in instilling the values of discipline, responsibility, and tolerance (Hasnadi Hasnadi & Santi, 2021).

However, the facts on the ground show that not all schools are successful in optimizing religious activities for character building. There are cases where religious activities are only ceremonial, without touching the dimension of internalizing values in depth. This shows that there is a gap between policies, practices, and the results of student character formation (Nurkholis & Santosa, 2024). The leadership of the principal is a key factor in determining the direction and

success of character education in schools. The principal plays the role of a mover, facilitator, as well as an example for school residents in carrying out meaningful religious activities (Hamnan Andi Baso Malla, Yusuf, Sapsuha, & Misnah, 2020).

Previous studies have shown that value-based leadership can increase student involvement in religious practices, while strengthening discipline and noble morals (Akhyar, Zukdi, & Deliani, 2024). This is in line with the transformational leadership paradigm that emphasizes example, motivation, and moral guidance. (H A B Malla, Yusuf, Sapsuha, & Misnah, 2020) In the context of religious and public schools, the principal's strategy in integrating religious values into the school culture is an important factor that determines the success of character education (Effendi, 2025). However, a number of studies still place more emphasis on normative and policy aspects, while the in-depth meaning of how school principals build practical strategies in the field has not been revealed. For example, how the principal motivates teachers, involves students, and builds synergy with parents through religious activities (ElDessouky, 2023). This research gap is important to fill, because the empirical experience of school principals can provide a contextual understanding of the actual leadership process. Qualitative perspectives are relevant to explore the meaning, experience, and leadership strategies in managing religious activities in schools (Ansori, Nahdi, Juanda, & Santoso, 2024).

An interesting phenomenon has also emerged in pesantren-based schools, where religious culture is very dominant. The principal plays the role of a central figure who ensures that religious activities are not only routine, but also internalize character values (Achmad Qusyairi Mahfudi & Rifa'i, 2025). In addition, recent research shows that the integration of religious values in school culture can create a conducive climate for the growth of positive behavior of students. Religious activities such as congregational prayers, Qur'an studies, and joint prayer have been proven to strengthen a sense of responsibility, discipline, and solidarity (Cahyanto, Indana, Fiveronica, Salamah, & Garbacz, 2024).

From the social side, this research is also important because religion-based character education can be a moral fortress for the younger generation from the negative influences of modernization, such as individualism, hedonism, and deviant behavior. Schools, through the leadership of the principal, can provide a learning space that balances intellectual, emotional, and spiritual aspects. From a cultural perspective, effective leadership of school principals can strengthen religious identity while building tolerance between religious communities, especially in heterogeneous schools. This is relevant to the needs of Indonesia's multicultural society which emphasizes social harmony in diversity.

From an educational perspective, the importance of this research lies in the effort to find principals' leadership strategies that can be replicated in other schools. This supports the national agenda in strengthening character education based on religious values in a sustainable manner. (D A Wibowo & Sari, 2025) Therefore, this study focuses on the leadership strategy of school principals in improving the character of students through religious activities in schools. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the real practices, experiences, and meanings of the principal in managing these activities. Theoretically, this research is expected to enrich the study of educational leadership by emphasizing spiritual and moral aspects. Practically, the results of this research can be a reference for school principals, teachers, and policy makers in designing more effective strategies for strengthening students' character through religious activities. (Ahmad & Rahman, 2021)

From this description, the urgency of this research lies in the need to understand more concretely how school principals implement leadership strategies that are not only normative, but are really able to move religious culture through systematic and sustainable religious activities. This is important considering that there are still many schools that face a gap between character

strengthening policies and implementation practices in the field. (A Q Mahfudi & Rifa'i, 2025) The novelty of this research lies in its focus that explores the empirical experience of school principals directly, by integrating transformational leadership perspectives and value-based leadership in the context of religious activities in secondary schools. This approach makes a new contribution to the literature by demonstrating leadership strategies that are operational, contextual, and replicable, so that this study offers a deeper understanding of the development of religious character through school leadership.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. Pendekatan This was chosen because it is in accordance with the purpose of the research that wants to explore in depth the leadership strategy of the principal in improving the character of students through religious activities. Case studies allow researchers to understand leadership phenomena in a contextual, holistic, and in-depth manner in a specific school setting (Akhyar et al., 2024). The location of the research was set at SMA Islam Malang, a religious-based high school that actively organizes various religious programs. The selection of this location was based on the consideration that the school has a strong vision and mission in fostering the religious character of students. The research period lasted for three months, from March to May 2025, so that the researchers had enough opportunities for repeated observations and in-depth interviews.

The subjects of the study include school principals as the main informants, religious education teachers, counseling guidance teachers, and student representatives who are actively involved in religious activities. Selection of informants using *purposive sampling* With the criteria: (a) having direct experience in religious activities at school, (b) understanding the principal's leadership policies, and (c) willing to provide information openly. When required, the *snowball sampling* is also used to recruit additional relevant informants (Fathan Fahmi, Rofiq, & Zuhriyah, 2024). Data collection techniques are carried out through several methods. First, semi-structured interviews with principals, teachers, and students to explore leadership strategies, religious practices, and students' character experiences. Second, participatory observation of routine activities such as congregational prayers, book studies, and commemoration of religious holidays to see real practices. Third, documentation in the form of school archives, activity schedules, photos, and reports on religious programs to complete the data. (Hasnadi Hasnadi & Santi, 2021).

The validity of the data is maintained through triangulation of sources and methods by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documentation. Member checking is carried out by reassuring provisional findings to informants, while trail audits are used to record all stages of research. Data analysis follows the Miles & Huberman model through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. (Hamlan Andi Baso Malla et al., 2020) The coding process is carried out to identify key themes such as example, empowerment, and habituation, which are then interpreted to produce an in-depth understanding of the principal's leadership strategy in strengthening the religious character of students. (Fitri Nur Hayati & Susatya, 2020).

In addition, this study uses thematic analysis to identify the pattern of school principal's leadership strategy. (F N Hayati & Susatya, 2020) The data obtained through open coding is then grouped into categories, such as strategies for planning, implementing, and evaluating religious activities. Next, axial coding is carried out to find relationships between categories, so that a large theme is formed that explains the principal's leadership strategy (Hasan Sarip et al., 2023). With this methodology, the research is expected to be able to produce a comprehensive description and in-depth interpretation of how the principal at SMA Islam Malang carries out leadership strategies in improving the character of students through religious activities. The results of the research are also expected to make a theoretical contribution to the study of religious value-based educational

leadership, as well as a practical contribution to schools in developing a more effective religious culture.(Hassan & Yusoff, 2020)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. The Example of School Principals in Religious Activities

Based on the analysis of interview data with principals, teachers, and students, as well as participatory observations at SMA Islam Malang, it was found that the principal's leadership strategy in improving the character of students through religious activities is centered on the formation of the school's religious culture. The principal emphasized the importance of integrating religious values in every activity, both intracurricular and extracurricular.(Sarip et al., 2023) For example, the principal encourages teachers to always open learning with joint prayer and make students accustomed to carrying out congregational prayers at the school mosque. The next finding shows that the principal's strategy is carried out through example (*role model*).

The principal emphasized the importance of internalizing religious values in all school activities. This integration can be seen through the habit of prayer before learning, the implementation of congregational prayers, and the morning tadarus program which is attended by students and teachers.(Mustafa & Ahmad, 2019) Field observations show that this activity takes place consistently and is a characteristic of school culture. These findings are in line with the theory of character habituation which states that moral values are formed through repetitive practices that take place continuously. According to Anita (2025), a strong religious culture is an important foundation in fostering the spiritual character of students. Thus, the consistency of the implementation of religious activities at SMA Islam Malang strengthens the habituation of religious values naturally.

The principal is actively present in religious activities, such as dhuha prayers, tadarus, and routine recitation. Observations show that the presence of the principal in these activities provides a motivational boost for students and teachers to be more disciplined. In addition to examples, school principals also implement strategies to empower teachers and students in religious activities.(Lubis & Sari, 2020) Teachers are given space to develop creativity in religious programs, such as recitation competitions, Islamic studies, and student spiritual development (rohis). Meanwhile, students are involved in the committee of major activities, such as the commemoration of the Prophet's Birthday or the lightning boarding school. This involvement forms a sense of responsibility, leadership, and solidarity among students.

Other findings reveal the existence of a systematic evaluation and habituation mechanism. Each religious activity is evaluated through regular meetings with teachers, so that there is continuous improvement. In addition, the principal emphasized habituation as the main strategy in character building. (Ibrahim & Salleh, 2018)Observations show that students are accustomed to reading prayers before studying, saying greetings, and maintaining the cleanliness of the school environment as part of the implementation of religious values.

However, this study also found challenges and obstacles. Some students still show less disciplined behavior, such as being late to attend congregational prayers or not being serious in tadarus activities. Another obstacle comes from limited facilities and time, given the tight academic schedule.(Khalid & Noor, 2022) However, the principal overcomes this with a persuasive approach and builds communication with the student's parents. These obstacles do not reduce the essence of the leadership strategy, but rather show that efforts to build religious character require consistency and cooperation from all parties.

The results of this study show that the principal's leadership strategy in improving the character of students through religious activities is based on the integration of religious values in school culture. These findings are in line with transformational leadership theory that emphasizes the role of leaders in providing inspiration, example, and motivation (Hamlan Andi Baso Malla et al., 2020). The example of school principals who consistently follow religious activities has been shown to have implications for increasing student discipline, supporting the findings (Dadang

Ari Wibowo & Sari, 2025) that the transformational leadership of the school principal plays a significant role in strengthening religious values.

B. Empowerment of Teachers as the Main Implementer of Religious Programs

The results of interviews and documentation show that school principals empower teachers optimally in the implementation of religious activities. PAI, BK, and Rohis coaches are given the authority to plan, develop, and carry out various religious programs such as routine studies, moral habituation, and Islamic holiday activities. This granting of authority creates good collaboration between teachers and strengthens their role as character educators.

The strategies for empowering teachers and students found in this study are also in accordance with the concept *value-based leadership*. By providing space for teachers and students to play an active role in religious activities, the principal creates a participatory and meaningful learning environment. (Sari & Wahyudi, 2022) These findings reinforce the results of research that emphasizes that value-based leadership supports the formation of religious discipline through the active involvement of all school residents. Findings on evaluation and habituation mechanisms show that the formation of religious character is not an instant process, but requires consistency. (M. A. Rahman & Khan, 2021) This is in line with research (Anita, 2025) which emphasizes the importance of religious school culture in strengthening character education. Routine evaluations conducted by school principals emphasize the importance of reflection and continuous improvement in the implementation of religious programs.

The study also confirms that challenges such as limited facilities and student discipline are unavoidable, but can be managed through effective communication and persuasive approaches. These results are consistent with (Hasnadi Hasnadi & Santi, 2021), which found that barriers to religious activities in schools can be minimized through cooperation between principals, teachers, and parents. Thus, the leadership of the principal has a strategic role in overcoming obstacles to the implementation of religious programs. (Yusuf & Hassan, 2017) When compared to previous research, this study offers a new perspective by emphasizing the role of direct role of school principals in increasing student participation in religious activities. (F Fahmi, Rofiq, & Zuhriyah, 2024) Some of the previous research has focused more on policy and program aspects, while this study shows the practical meaning of the personal involvement of school principals as a factor that strengthens student motivation.

Theoretically, this study expands the understanding of educational leadership by combining transformational leadership theory and value-based leadership in the context of religious activities. The combination of these two theories provides a comprehensive conceptual framework in explaining how leadership strategies can contribute to the formation of students' religious character. (H Hasnadi & Santi, 2021) Practically, the results of this study imply that schools need to emphasize consistent religious habits, active involvement of all school residents, and the example of the principal in every religious activity. For education policy makers, these findings can be a reference in designing a more systematic and sustainable religious-based character education program.

This research also opens up opportunities for further research. Follow-up studies can broaden the focus by comparing the principal's leadership strategies across different types of schools (public, private, religious, and public), or using an ethnographic approach to delve deeper into the dynamics of religious culture in schools. (F. Rahman & Supriadi, 2023) Thus, the understanding of the principal's leadership strategy in improving the character of students through religious activities can be more comprehensive and contextual.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the principal's leadership strategy in strengthening the religious character of students at SMA Islam Malang rests on three main findings, namely the direct example of the principal, the empowerment of teachers and students, and habituation accompanied by systematic evaluation. These findings show that the success of religious activities does not only depend on the program, but especially on the leadership style that is able to move all school

residents. These results reinforce the *transformational leadership* theory that emphasizes example as the core influence of leaders, while complementing previous research that tends to emphasize normative aspects without explaining operational practices in the field. The novelty of this research lies in the detailed presentation of how example, empowerment, and evaluation are applied concretely so as to form a sustainable religious culture at the secondary school level.

Theoretically, this research contributes to expanding the understanding of the integration of *transformational leadership* and *value-based leadership* in the management of religious activities oriented towards character formation. Practically, this study provides a reference for school principals to strengthen their role as role models, for teachers to develop creativity in fostering religious activities, and for schools to implement habituation and structured routine evaluations. The recommendation for further research is to conduct a comparative study between types of schools or use an ethnographic approach to delve deeper into the dynamics of religious culture, so that the picture of leadership in the context of character education can be more comprehensive and applicable.

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