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The Leadership of School Principals in Shaping Teachers' Character in Madrasahs in Seberang, Jambi City, Indonesia

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Abstract: This study examines the role of school principals' leadership in shaping teachers' character in Islamic schools (madrasahs) in Jambi City, Indonesia. Using an interpretive phenomenological approach, the research explores the lived experiences of both principals and teachers in five madrasah institutions in Seberang, Jambi City. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations conducted over eight months. The findings reveal four key dimensions of principal leadership that significantly influence the shaping of teachers' character: (1) value-based leadership modeling, (2) development of institutional culture, (3) facilitation of reflective professional development, and (4) integration of spiritual-professional domains. This study contributes to the understanding of educational leadership in a religiously-oriented context, showing how school principals play a vital role as agents in developing teachers' character, which in turn impacts overall educational quality. The research addresses a significant gap in the literature by examining the influence of leadership on the formation of teachers' character in the specific cultural and religious context of Indonesian Islamic schools.

Keyword: Educational Leadership, Character Formation, Islamic Education, Madrasah, Phenomenology, & Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

The quality of education is intrinsically linked to the quality of teachers, whose effectiveness encompasses not only pedagogical competence but also character traits that influence their professional practices (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Teachers' character is defined as a constellation of moral, ethical, and professional dispositions that guide their behavior and decision-making—an area that has garnered increasing attention in educational research as a key factor in effective teaching and student development (Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Berkowitz, 2011). In this context, school leadership, particularly the leadership of principals, has been identified as a significant external factor influencing teachers' development (Leithwood et al., 2020).

In Indonesia, madrasahs (Islamic schools) represent a substantial portion of the educational landscape, serving about 15% of the nation's student population (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2022). These institutions operate within a dual educational paradigm, aiming to meet national curriculum standards while providing Islamic religious education. This unique position creates specific challenges and opportunities for leadership, particularly in relation to teacher development (Raihani, 2018). Although research on educational leadership and teacher quality is expanding, understanding how school principals' leadership specifically contributes to the formation of teachers' character, especially in religiously-oriented education like Indonesia's madrasahs, remains limited. Most existing literature focuses on teacher performance, instructional improvement, or student outcomes (Robinson et al., 2008; Day et al., 2016), with relatively less attention given to teachers' character formation as a distinct developmental process.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the phenomenon of school principals' leadership in shaping teachers' character in Seberang Jambi City madrasahs, Indonesia. Using an interpretive phenomenological approach, this research aims to understand the lived experiences of principals and teachers regarding how leadership practices influence the development of teachers' character.

The influence of educational leadership on teacher development has been recognized in educational research. Extensive reviews and meta-analyses consistently identify leadership as a significant factor influencing teachers' motivation, commitment, and effectiveness (Leithwood et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2008). Contemporary understandings of effective educational leadership emphasize its multidimensional nature, including instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2011), transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006), and distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006), among other frameworks.

Especially relevant to this study is the concept of moral or ethical leadership in education. Scholars such as Starratt (2004) and Sergiovanni (2007) have emphasized the moral dimension of educational leadership, arguing that effective school principals lead not only through administrative competence but through moral authority rooted in shared values and ethical commitments. This moral dimension of leadership becomes especially salient when considering its impact on the development of teachers' character.

Teachers' character encompasses moral, ethical, and professional dispositions that guide their behavior and decision-making (Berkowitz, 2011). This overlaps with, but differs from, teachers' professional identity, which refers to their perception of themselves as professionals (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Research on teachers' character development has identified several influential factors, including personal biography, pre-service preparation, organizational culture, and ongoing professional experiences (Day et al., 2006).

Sockett (2012) proposed a framework for teachers' character, encompassing five virtues: honesty, courage, care, justice, and practical wisdom. Similarly, Carr (2007) argued that teaching is inherently a moral endeavor requiring specific character traits. This perspective suggests that teachers' character is not merely a personal attribute but a professional necessity with significant implications for educational practice and student development.

Leadership in the context of Islamic education integrates distinctive elements derived from Islamic principles and traditions. Raihani (2018) identifies several key attributes of Islamic educational leadership, including *taqwa* (awareness of God), *ilm* (knowledge), and *akhlaq* (character). These attributes shape leadership practices in madrasahs and other Islamic educational institutions. Specifically in Indonesia, madrasah leadership operates within a complex environment shaped by national educational policies, Islamic educational traditions, and local cultural contexts (Raihani & Sumintono, 2010). School principals in this context must navigate dual expectations: meeting national standards while upholding Islamic educational values. This creates a unique leadership context that may influence teacher development in

ways not fully captured by mainstream educational leadership theories (Hasbulloh & Kurahman, 2025).

Phenomenological research methodology has gained traction in educational leadership studies as an approach capable of capturing the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of educational stakeholders (Giles, 2019). Interpretive phenomenological analysis, specifically, offers tools for understanding how educational leaders and teachers experience and make sense of their interactions and professional development (Smith et al., 2009). Several studies have used phenomenological approaches to investigate aspects of educational leadership (Regan, 2012; Crow et al., 2017), although few have specifically examined the phenomenon of leadership's influence on the formation of teachers' character. This methodological approach is well-suited to exploring the subjective, relational, and contextual dimensions of how school leadership is experienced and interpreted by leaders and teachers in relation to character development.

Despite substantial literature on educational leadership and teacher development, a significant gap remains in understanding how school principals' leadership specifically contributes to the formation of teachers' character in religiously-oriented education contexts, such as Indonesian madrasahs. Most existing research focuses on leadership's effects on teacher performance or student outcomes, with limited attention to the processes through which leadership affects teachers' character as a distinct developmental outcome. Furthermore, there is limited empirical research examining this dynamic in the Indonesian madrasah context, where the integration of national educational standards with Islamic educational values creates a unique environment for leadership and teacher development. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a phenomenological account of how school leadership influences the formation of teachers' character in Seberang Jambi City madrasahs.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach with an interpretive phenomenological perspective to explore the lived experiences of school principals and teachers regarding the influence of leadership on the formation of teachers' character. Interpretive phenomenology, based on the Heideggerian philosophical tradition, focuses on understanding how individuals make meaning of their experiences in specific contexts (Smith et al., 2009). This approach was chosen for its ability to capture the subjective, relational, and contextual dimensions of leadership and character development as experienced by educational stakeholders.

The research design incorporates various data collection methods to allow for methodological triangulation, including in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. This multi-method approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon from different perspectives.

Research Location and Participants

The research was conducted at Madrasah Aliyah As'ad, one of the madrasah institutions in Seberang, Jambi City, Indonesia. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to identify individuals with direct experience of the phenomenon being studied. The final sample of participants includes:

- ✓ School principals
- ✓ 25 teachers (15 female, 10 male)
- ✓ A range of teaching experience (ranging from 2 to 30 years)
- ✓ A variety of subject specializations (both religious and non-religious subjects)

Data Collection

Data collection occurred over an eight-month period and utilized three primary methods:

1. **In-depth interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all school principals (approximately 90 minutes each) and selected teachers (approximately 60 minutes each). The interview protocol focused on participants' experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes regarding leadership practices and the development of teachers' character.
2. **Focus group discussions:** Five focus groups (one per madrasah) were held with 4-6 teachers per group. These discussions explored collective experiences and perceptions about the influence of principal leadership on teachers' character.
3. **Participant observation:** Approximately 40 hours of observation were conducted, focusing on principal-teacher interactions, staff meetings, professional development activities, and other contexts where leadership practices related to teacher development could be observed.

All interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed for analysis. Field notes were maintained during the observations to document contextual information and the researcher's reflections.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the interpretive phenomenological analysis procedures outlined by Smith et al. (2009), involving several iterative stages:

1. **Familiarization:** Repeated reading of transcripts and field notes to become familiar with the data.
2. **Initial Coding:** Line-by-line coding to identify meaningful units related to leadership experiences and character development.
3. **Theme Development:** Grouping related codes into emergent themes at the individual participant level.
4. **Cross-case Analysis:** Identifying patterns and differences across cases.
5. **Interpretation:** Interpreting the identified themes within the context of existing literature and theoretical frameworks.

The analysis was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to preserve the linguistic nuances, with the themes and selected quotes then translated into English for reporting purposes. The accuracy of the translation was verified through a back-translation procedure.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Several strategies were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the research:

- ✓ Methodological triangulation using multiple data collection methods
- ✓ Member checking with participants to verify interpretations
- ✓ Peer debriefing with colleagues familiar with qualitative research and the Indonesian educational context
- ✓ Reflective journaling to document the researcher's assumptions and decision-making process

Ethical considerations included obtaining formal approval from the institutional review board, securing written consent from all participants, maintaining participant confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms, and conducting the research in a manner that respects local cultural and institutional norms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The analysis revealed four key dimensions of school principals' leadership that significantly influence teachers' character formation in the context of the madrasahs studied:

(1) value-based leadership modeling, (2) development of institutional culture, (3) facilitation of reflective professional development, and (4) integration of spiritual-professional domains. Each dimension includes specific leadership practices that were experienced by teachers in unique ways.

Value-Based Leadership Modeling

Both school principals and teachers consistently identified leadership modeling as a fundamental process through which principals' leadership influences teachers' character. This modeling operates through explicit and implicit demonstrations of valued character traits. Principals consciously acknowledged their role as character role models: "As a leader, I must embody the character I want to see in my teachers. My actions speak louder than my words. When I demonstrate dedication, integrity, and compassion, I set these as the expected norms" (Principal, Madrasah Aliyah As'ad).

Teachers also emphasized the impact of the principal's modeling on their own character development:

"The punctuality of our principal has transformed my own time management. Seeing him arrive early every day, ready and present for students and staff, has changed my professional habits. This was not achieved through reprimands but through consistent example" (Teacher, Madrasah Aliyah As'ad).

Influential modeling behaviors include:

- ✓ Demonstrating work ethic and time commitment
- ✓ Showing respect and fairness in interactions with various stakeholders
- ✓ Displaying resilience and problem-solving when facing challenges
- ✓ Demonstrating ongoing learning and intellectual humility

Importantly, the effectiveness of modeling was enhanced when principals explicitly linked their behaviors to underlying values and principles, particularly those aligned with Islamic teachings. As one principal explained:

"I try to connect my leadership practices with Islamic principles. For example, I explain how our attention to detail in administrative tasks reflects *ihsan* [excellence] and how our treatment of students reflects the Prophet's teachings on compassion" (Principal, Madrasah Aliyah As'ad).

Development of Institutional Culture

The second dimension through which principals' leadership influences teachers' character is the intentional development of institutional culture. Principals shape organizational norms, rituals, and expectations in ways that reinforce specific character traits among teachers. Key aspects of this cultural development include:

- 1) Articulating and reinforcing shared values: Principals regularly articulate core values and link them to Islamic principles and professional standards. These values are reinforced through various forms of communication and institutional practices. "Our principal frequently refers to our core values—excellence, compassion, integrity, and responsibility—and connects them to the teachings of the Quran and professional standards. These are not just wall decorations; they are discussion points in our meetings and evaluation criteria." (Teacher, Madrasah Aliyah As'ad)
- 2) Forming rituals that reinforce character: Routine institutional practices are established to strengthen valued character traits: "We begin each week with a staff reflection circle where we share challenges and professional insights. This practice has developed my capacity for vulnerability, collegial support, and reflective thinking" (Teacher, Madrasah Aliyah As'ad).

- 3) Creating accountability structures: Principals implement systems that hold teachers accountable for character-related behaviors while providing supportive feedback: "We have implemented a peer observation system that focuses not only on teaching techniques but also on teacher-student interactions and professional behavior. This has made character development an explicit part of our professional growth." (Principal, Madrasah Aliyah As'ad).
- 4) Recognizing and celebrating exemplars of character: Teachers whose behaviors exemplify the desired character traits are recognized and publicly celebrated: "Our principal has a practice of highlighting 'moments of excellence' during staff meetings. This is not just about instructional achievements but also about exceptional care for students, ethical decision-making, or collegial support. This shapes our understanding of what is valued here." (Teacher, Madrasah Aliyah As'ad)

Teachers describe how this cultural dimension creates a supportive and challenging context for their character development: "The culture here makes it hard to maintain negative habits. When everyone around you shows commitment and care, you feel an internal pressure to rise to that standard" (Teacher, Madrasah Aliyah As'ad).

Facilitation of Reflective Professional Development

The third dimension involves the facilitation by principals of reflective professional development opportunities specifically designed to enhance teachers' character alongside pedagogical skills.

Key aspects of this dimension include:

- 1) Teacher evaluation focused on character: The evaluation process explicitly addresses the character dimensions of teaching practices: "Our evaluation framework includes not only instructional effectiveness but also professional ethics, student relationships, and collegial contributions. This indicates that character plays a role in how we assess professional quality." (Principal, Madrasah Aliyah As'ad)
- 2) Targeted professional development: Principals organize professional learning opportunities that specifically address the character dimension of teaching: "Our principal organizes workshops on emotional intelligence, ethical decision-making, and Islamic professional ethics. These sessions explicitly address the foundations of our professional character." (Teacher, Madrasah Aliyah As'ad)
- 3) Structured reflection opportunities: Regular opportunities for professional reflection are integrated into teachers' schedules: "The reflective journaling practice instituted by our principal has transformed my awareness of my own character growth areas. Taking time each week to reflect on specific interactions with students has highlighted patterns in my responses that I need to address." (Teacher, Madrasah Aliyah As'ad).
- 4) Growth-oriented feedback: Principals provide feedback that addresses the character dimension in a supportive, growth-oriented manner: "After observing my class, our principal not only commented on my teaching techniques but noted how my patience with struggling students reflected compassion, while my high expectations showed respect for their abilities. This feedback helps me see character as an integral part of teaching excellence." (Teacher, Madrasah Aliyah As'ad)

Teachers describe how this reflective process contributes to conscious character development: "This reflective practice has helped me shift from unconscious reactions to conscious responses. I'm more aware of how my character shapes my teaching, and I'm more deliberate in developing specific virtues" (Teacher, Madrasah Aliyah As'ad).

Spiritual-Professional Integration

The fourth dimension involves the explicit integration by school principals of the spiritual and professional domains in a way that supports teachers' character development. This dimension is particularly distinctive in the context of madrasahs.

Key aspects of this dimension include:

- 1) Framing teaching as a spiritual practice: Principals consistently frame teaching as both a professional and spiritual endeavor: "Our principal helps us see teaching as both a professional responsibility and an act of worship [ibadah]. This perspective changes how I approach even routine tasks, viewing them as opportunities to demonstrate devotion and excellence" (Teacher, Madrasah Aliyah As'ad).
- 2) Connecting professional ethics with religious principles: Professional standards are explicitly linked to Islamic ethical principles: "During our professional development sessions, our principal consistently connects professional standards with Islamic concepts such as amanah [trust] and ihsan [excellence]. This helps me see professional ethics as an extension of my religious commitment" (Teacher, Madrasah Aliyah As'ad).
- 3) Creating opportunities for spiritual reflection: Regular opportunities for spiritual reflection are integrated into the professional schedule: "The morning reflection implemented by our principal, where we read Quranic verses or Hadith related to knowledge or character before starting our workday, helps center my teaching around spiritual goals" (Teacher, Madrasah Aliyah As'ad).
- 4) Modeling spiritual-professional integration: Principals demonstrate the integration of spiritual and professional identity in their own practices: "I have observed how our principal smoothly integrates religious principles into administrative decisions, showing how faith can inform professional judgments without compromising educational standards." (Teacher, Madrasah Aliyah As'ad)

Teachers describe how this integration supports their character development by providing a coherent framework that connects their personal, spiritual, and professional identities: "This integration has helped me develop a more unified sense of self. I no longer feel torn between my identity as a Muslim and my identity as a teacher. My character development in one domain strengthens the other." (Teacher, Madrasah Aliyah As'ad)

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal how principals' leadership influences teachers' character formation through multidimensional processes that operate at the individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels. These findings expand existing understandings of educational leadership in several important ways.

Expanding Leadership Theory in Religious Education Contexts

The findings suggest that leadership in the religiously-oriented educational context, such as Indonesian madrasahs, combines elements from various leadership frameworks while adding distinctive dimensions that are not fully covered in mainstream leadership theory. The value-based leadership modeling dimension aligns with transformational leadership theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006), which emphasizes leader modeling and inspiration. However, in the context of madrasahs, this modeling is explicitly based on religious values and principles, creating a distinctive form of "Islamic transformational leadership" that warrants further theoretical development. Similarly, the institutional culture development dimension reflects elements of organizational culture leadership (Schein, 2010) but with a specific emphasis on culture as a vehicle for character formation rather than merely performance enhancement. This underscores the need for leadership theories to more explicitly address the moral dimensions of organizational culture.

Character Formation as an Outcome of Leadership

The findings highlight teachers' character formation as a significant outcome of leadership that warrants greater attention in educational leadership research. While extensive literature examines leadership's effects on teacher performance and student achievement (Robinson et al., 2008; Leithwood et al., 2020), relatively less attention has been given to the influence of leadership on teachers' character development.

This study demonstrates that character formation is a significant intermediate outcome between leadership practices and ultimate educational outcomes. Teachers whose characters have been positively influenced by effective leadership are better able to demonstrate improved instructional practices, stronger student relationships, and greater organizational commitment, ultimately contributing to improved student outcomes.

Contextual Leadership Practices

The findings show how effective leadership practices are highly contextual in specific cultural, religious, and institutional settings. The spiritual-professional integration dimension, in particular, highlights how leadership in the madrasah context draws on Islamic concepts and practices to enhance teacher development in ways not covered by context-neutral leadership theories. This suggests the importance of developing a more culturally responsive leadership framework that recognizes how effective leadership can manifest differently across diverse educational contexts. Rather than seeking universal leadership principles, research may be more productive in investigating how leadership principles are contextualized and adapted for specific educational environments.

Implications for Practice

The findings have several practical implications for educational leadership in madrasahs and similar contexts:

1. **Leadership preparation:** Principal preparation programs should explicitly address character formation as an outcome of leadership, equipping future principals with strategies to influence teachers' character development.
2. **Evaluation frameworks:** Teacher evaluation systems should include character dimensions alongside instructional effectiveness, highlighting the importance of character in professional practice.
3. **Professional development design:** Professional development should explicitly address the character dimensions of teaching practices through reflective activities and learning opportunities focused on character.
4. **Institutional culture:** Principals should intentionally develop institutional cultures that reinforce the desired character traits through explicit values, meaningful rituals, and recognition practices.
5. **Spiritual integration:** In religiously-oriented educational contexts, principals should explore appropriate ways to integrate spiritual and professional domains to support the development of a coherent teacher identity.

Limitations and Future Research

While providing valuable insights, this study has several limitations that suggest directions for future research:

1. **Geographical scope:** This study focuses on madrasahs in one city in Indonesia, limiting generalizability. Future research should explore this phenomenon across diverse geographical contexts.
2. **Longitudinal perspective:** The cross-sectional design limits understanding of how leadership's influence on character develops over time. Longitudinal studies would provide valuable insights into the trajectory of teachers' character development.

3. Student outcomes: This study focuses on the influence of leadership on teachers' character without examining the subsequent effects on student outcomes. Future research should investigate the relationship between teachers' character development and student learning and development.
4. Comparative perspectives: Comparative studies examining the influence of leadership on teachers' character across different types of educational institutions (e.g., madrasahs vs. secular schools) would illuminate the contextual factors that mediate this relationship.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the phenomenon of school principals' leadership influence on teachers' character formation in the context of madrasahs in Jambi City, Indonesia. Through an interpretive phenomenological approach, this study identified four key dimensions through which principals influence teachers' character: value-based leadership modeling, development of institutional culture, facilitation of reflective professional development, and integration of spiritual-professional domains. These findings contribute to the understanding of educational leadership by highlighting teachers' character formation as a significant outcome of leadership, showing the contextual nature of effective leadership practices, and identifying specific processes through which leadership influences teachers' development in religiously-oriented education contexts.

The study demonstrates that effective school principals in the madrasah context act as character architects, deliberately creating conditions for teachers' character development through their personal example, the institutional culture they develop, the professional growth they facilitate, and the integration of spiritual and professional domains they promote. By understanding and enhancing these leadership dimensions, madrasah principals can more effectively contribute to the development of teachers' character, ultimately supporting educational quality and student development.

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