

Implementation of School Principal's Leadership Management in Strengthening Students' Character

Ummu Hani¹, Syaiful Eddy², Heri Setyo Nugroho³

¹SD Negeri 65 Palembang, South Sumatra, Indonesia

^{2,3}Universitas PGRI Palembang, South Sumatra, Indonesia

Corresponding author e-mail: ummuhaniaaydrus@gmail.com

Article History: Received on November 4, 2025, Revised on November 8, 2025, Published on November 30, 2025

Abstract: This study aims to examine the implementation of school principal leadership management in strengthening students' character, focusing on the four managerial functions of planning, organizing, actuating, and evaluating. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the research was conducted at SD Negeri 53 Palembang with data collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis involving the principal, teachers, students, and parents. The findings show that the principal's leadership management effectively supports the development of students' character through structured planning, distributed role organization, consistent role modeling, and systematic evaluation. Character values were reinforced through daily-weekly-monthly habituation routines, supported by collaborative involvement between teachers, students, and parents. The study also reveals several contextual challenges—such as inconsistent discipline and limited parental reinforcement—which prompted the principal to apply adaptive strategies including revising morning routines, strengthening parent communication, and providing personalized mentoring. These adaptive mechanisms ensured continuous improvement and alignment between planned programs and actual student needs. This study contributes a practical and replicable leadership model demonstrating how managerial consistency, stakeholder collaboration, and ongoing evaluation synergistically foster sustainable character education in elementary schools.

Keywords: School principal, leadership, character, education, elementary school

A. Introduction

Education has always been recognized as a universal vehicle for human development, fostering not only intellectual advancement but also the moral and emotional maturity essential for a sustainable society. Globally, education systems are being redefined to balance cognitive achievement with moral and social responsibility, aligning with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4, which promotes quality education for holistic human growth. Nations worldwide are emphasizing the integration of character and values education into school systems to counter the growing moral and ethical challenges brought by globalization and digital transformation (Kim et al., 2023).

In Indonesia, this global movement is mirrored in the national policy framework known as *Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter*, or Character Education Strengthening. The initiative is embedded within the government's "Golden Indonesia 2045 Vision," positioning education

as the cornerstone for developing a generation that is intellectually capable, spiritually grounded, and socially responsible (Kemendikdasmen Kemenag & Kemendagri, 2025). The Joint Ministerial Circular No. 1 of 2025, involving the Ministries of Education, Home Affairs, and Religious Affairs, emphasizes character building as a collaborative responsibility among schools, families, and communities. Through this framework, schools are urged to cultivate key values such as religiosity, morality, independence, hard work, creativity, and social responsibility (Suriansyah & Aslamiah, 2015).

Within this context, primary education becomes a strategic foundation for moral cultivation. At the heart of this process lies the school principal, whose leadership significantly determines the success of character education programs. Numerous studies affirm that effective leadership creates a climate conducive to moral development, fosters discipline, and builds an ethical learning culture (Bass & Riggio, 2021; Mulyanto et al., 2021; Wahdah et al., 2023). International perspectives further emphasize that school leaders act not only as administrators but as moral agents who shape school culture through their vision, behavior, and managerial decisions (Hussein et al., 2022; Park & Shin, 2023).

However, sustaining a consistent and value-driven school culture requires more than inspirational leadership. It demands comprehensive management that includes planning, organizing, actuating, and evaluating as conceptualized by George R. Terry. Through strategic planning, principals design programs that align character education goals with curricular and extracurricular activities. The organizing function ensures the distribution of roles, resources, and coordination among teachers, students, and parents. Actuating involves leading by example and fostering collaborative practices in everyday routines. Evaluation, finally, functions as a control mechanism to assess progress and provide feedback for improvement (Rusmana et al., 2023; Zain, 2022).

Yet, in practice, many schools face challenges in implementing such holistic management systems. Previous research tends to focus narrowly on leadership styles or inspirational aspects, overlooking the managerial dynamics that ensure sustainability and integration across the school system (Carlyna et al., 2022; Effendi, 2022). Common obstacles include limited time allocation, teacher workload, inconsistent parental involvement, and diverse student backgrounds (Ulya et al., 2024). Studies in Finland, Singapore, and Malaysia also reveal similar complexities, showing that successful character education depends on structured, collaborative leadership rather than sporadic moral instruction (Hussein et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2021; Virtanen & Lerkkanen, 2020).

Responding to these challenges, the present study explores the implementation of leadership management by school principals in strengthening students' character, emphasizing how planning, organizing, actuating, and evaluating are integrated to sustain consistent character formation in primary schools. The study offers a deeper understanding of how principals transform policy into practical strategies that engage teachers, parents, and students as moral partners. It aims to provide empirical evidence from the Indonesian context while enriching the global discourse on moral and transformational educational leadership (Kim et al., 2023; Legi, 2024; Lickona, 2022).

Ultimately, this study seeks to answer the central research question: *How does the school principal implement leadership management through planning, organizing, actuating, and*

evaluating—to strengthen students' character, and what challenges and adaptive strategies emerge in this process?

B. Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the implementation of school principal leadership management in strengthening students' character. The research was conducted at SD Negeri 53 Palembang, selected through purposive sampling based on its consistent character education practices and strong leadership orientation. The study examined how the principal planned, organized, actuated, and evaluated character-strengthening activities.

Participants consisted of the principal, five teachers, three students, and three parents who were directly involved in the character program. Data were also obtained from various school documents, including the character development program, school regulations, and activity records. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis using instruments aligned with the research objectives.

To ensure clarity and traceability of empirical evidence, this study applied a coding system for field data: (D) for documentation, (W) for interviews, and (O) for observations. Each code is followed by a number and year, for example (D1, 2024) or (W2, 2024). The code (W-KS) specifically refers to interviews with the school principal. These codes appear throughout the Results and Discussion section to indicate the source of each finding.

Ethical considerations were adhered to, including voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality. Data analysis followed an interactive model involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion verification, with thematic categories aligned with the managerial functions of planning, organizing, actuating, and evaluating. Credibility was strengthened through source, technique, and time triangulation, while member checking was used to confirm the accuracy of interpretations.

C. Results and Discussion

Results

Planning : The results show that the principal formulated a character-oriented vision and integrated it into daily, weekly, and monthly habituation programs (D1, 2024). Several structured activities were included in the planning documents, such as the 3S routine (senyum, salam, sapa), morning prayer, literacy sessions, class duty rotations, and monthly thematic events designed to reinforce values of discipline, cooperation, respect, and responsibility (D2, 2024). Interviews with teachers confirmed that planning was conducted collaboratively at the beginning of each semester through coordination meetings involving teachers and parent representatives (W1, 2024). Challenges emerged during planning, including limited time for coordination, diverse student behavioral backgrounds, and inconsistent parental support for character-related routines (W1, 2024). To address these conditions, the principal introduced the Journal 7 KAIH as a student self-monitoring tool and parent-school communication medium (D3, 2024).

Organizing : The organization of activities involved distributing responsibilities among school actors. The vice principal of student affairs coordinated daily routines; the PAI teacher managed weekly religious sessions; and homeroom teachers supervised classroom-based character practices (W2, 2024). Students were assigned to complete and maintain the Journal 7 KAIH as a daily self-reflection record, which teachers reviewed weekly (D5, 2024). A character development team was established to oversee program operations. This team conducted weekly coordination meetings to review implementation progress, address emerging issues, and synchronize classroom practices with school-wide character goals (D6, 2024). Reported challenges included varied teacher commitment levels and limited availability of facilities supporting character habituation activities (W3, 2024).

Actuating : Habituation practices were implemented through daily routines such as morning assemblies, greetings, literacy activities, class duties, religious sessions, and extracurricular activities (O1, 2024). Observations showed students lining up independently before entering the classroom, teachers providing gentle reminders when routines were not followed, and the principal greeting students at the school gate (O2, 2024). A teacher noted that “discipline should grow from simple repeated habits such as lining up in the morning” (W4, 2024). Additional challenges included inconsistent discipline among students and inadequate reinforcement of character practices at home (W-KS, 2024).

Evaluation: Evaluation occurred through the review of behavior records, assessment of Journal 7 KAIH entries, teacher reflection meetings, and analysis of observation reports (D6, 2024). The evaluation cycle followed the pattern of data collection → reflection → principal review → decision-making → program revision → reimplementation (D7, 2024). Adjustments based on evaluation included strengthening morning routines after repeated tardiness incidents, increasing communication with parents following low engagement, and modifying the weekly religious session schedule to improve student participation (D7, 2024).

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the implementation of leadership management in strengthening students' character at SD Negeri 53 Palembang reflects a dynamic application of the POAE framework within real-world constraints. The planning process aligns with Terry's conceptualization of planning as a forward-looking process requiring structured program design and anticipation of environmental conditions. The integration of daily-weekly-monthly character routines confirms the importance of systematic planning in character formation, consistent with empirical studies showing that structured habituation programs enhance moral internalization in schools (Bass & Riggio, 2021; Zain, 2022).

The emergence of challenges—such as limited time, behavioral diversity, and inconsistent parental reinforcement—highlights the contextual complexity often faced in primary schools. The principal's response through the introduction of the Journal 7 KAIH illustrates an adaptive leadership approach. This aligns with Leithwood's view that effective school leaders adjust strategies in response to situational demands to maintain program

continuity and student engagement. The use of a self-monitoring journal further reflects the shift toward participatory tools that promote student agency, echoing findings by (Virtanen & Lerkkanen, 2020) regarding student-centered approaches to moral development.

The organizing process illustrates a clear example of distributed leadership, as responsibilities were shared among teachers, the vice principal, and students rather than centralized solely in the principal. This finding supports Spillane's assertion that distributed leadership enhances collective responsibility and strengthens school capacity for consistent program implementation. Similar findings were reported in Malaysian and Singaporean contexts, where distributed leadership structures improved the coherence of character education practices (Hussein et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2021).

In the actuating stage, the consistent modeling of behavior by the principal and teachers reflects the core mechanism of Social Cognitive Theory, which posits that students internalize values through observation and imitation. The independent behaviors observed—such as lining up, greeting routines, and autonomous class duties—corroborate (Berkowitz, 2021) claim that frequent authentic interactions are central to character development. Challenges in this stage, particularly inconsistent discipline and limited home reinforcement, are common in character education and require nuanced, individualized approaches. The principal's strategy of personalized mentoring demonstrates moral leadership in practice, resonating with Sergiovanni's argument that ethical influence is fundamental to shaping school culture.

The evaluation process mirrors the principles of the CIPP model, emphasizing both process and product assessment. The school's continuous improvement cycle shows an iterative approach that aligns with (Murcahyanto & Mohzana, 2023) findings on effective character program management. The adjustments made—such as revising morning routines and enhancing parent communication—exemplify adaptive strategies essential for maintaining alignment between planned programs and student needs.

Across all stages, adaptive strategies clearly emerged as direct responses to contextual challenges. These included the adoption of the Journal 7 KAIH, collaborative weekly coordination, personalized mentoring, and routine revisions informed by ongoing evaluation. These strategies collectively demonstrate how POAE functions operate dynamically rather than linearly, reinforcing the idea that effective character leadership requires both managerial consistency and responsive adaptation.

Overall, the discussion highlights that character strengthening is most effective when leadership practices combine structured program design, distributed organizational roles, consistent role modeling, and continuous evaluation. The study contributes to the theoretical refinement of POAE by showing how adaptive and distributed leadership principles can enhance character education in resource-constrained primary schools, aligning practice with contemporary perspectives on moral and transformational educational leadership.

D. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that the principal's leadership management effectively strengthens students' character when the four managerial functions—planning, organizing, actuating, and evaluating—are implemented systematically and supported by adaptive strategies. Planning was responsive to contextual constraints, requiring adjustments to routines, monitoring tools, and parent communication. Organizing was reinforced through distributed leadership, enabling shared responsibility among teachers, students, and school leaders and ensuring coherent program implementation.

Actuating relied on consistent habituation practices and role modeling, confirming that character formation is reinforced through daily behavioral routines and social interaction. Evaluation functioned as a continuous improvement mechanism, with data-driven reflections leading to strategic revisions in school routines and stakeholder engagement.

Theoretically, the findings extend the POAE model by highlighting the importance of adaptive and distributed leadership in resource-limited primary schools. Practically, the study offers a concise and replicable framework that integrates structured routines, collaborative participation, and iterative adjustments. Overall, effective character strengthening emerges from the synergy of managerial consistency, contextual adaptability, and collective leadership.

E. Acknowledgement

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to the principal, teachers, students, and parents of the participating elementary school for their cooperation and active involvement in this study. Special appreciation is extended to the supervisors and academic advisors for their guidance, constructive feedback, and encouragement throughout the research process. The author also acknowledges the support provided by the university in terms of research facilities, access to documentation, and administrative assistance. This study did not receive any specific financial funding; however, the non-financial support, including time, resources, and expertise from all parties involved, was invaluable in the successful completion of the research.

References

- Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E. (2021). *Transformational Leadership* (3rd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003126910>
- Berkowitz, Marvin W. (2021). Implementing and Assessing Evidence-Based Character Education. *Journal of Education*, 202(2), 191–197. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002205742111026908>
- Carlyna, R., Nurdin, S., & Malik, D. (2022). Leadership challenges in implementing school character programs. *Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan*, 10(2), 167–180. <https://doi.org/10.21831/jmp.v10i2.58823>
- Effendi, Y. R. (2022). School leadership strategies in character education management. *Journal of Educational Administration Research and Review*, 6(2), 102–118. <https://doi.org/10.17509/jear.v6i2.44591>
- Hussein, A., Jamaluddin, Z., & Ahmad, N. (2022). Distributed leadership and ethical school culture in Malaysian primary education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 26(10), 1153–1168. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2022.2050457>

- Kemendikdasmen Kemenag, & Kemendagri. (2025). *Joint Ministerial Circular No. 1 of 2025 on Strengthening Character Education in Schools*. Government of Indonesia.
- Kim, Y., Park, J., & Lee, H. (2023). Character education in the digital age: Global perspectives and local adaptations. *Educational Review*, 75(4), 612–630. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2023.2175947>
- Legi, S. (2024). Participatory leadership for sustainable school culture: Lessons from Indonesia. *Educational Management Journal*, 9(1), 33–49. <https://doi.org/10.24036/emj.v9i1.71123>
- Lickona, T. (2022). *Educating for character: How our schools can teach respect and responsibility*. Bantam Books.
- Mulyanto, H., Sari, D., & Widodo, A. (2021). Leadership effectiveness in strengthening student discipline and character. *Jurnal Kepemimpinan Pendidikan*, 5(1), 12–25. <https://doi.org/10.23917/jkp.v5i1.50122>
- Murcahyanto, H., & Mohzana, M. (2023). Evaluation of Character Education Program Based on School Culture. *IJE: Interdisciplinary Journal of Education*, 1(1), 38–52. <https://doi.org/10.61277/ije.v1i1.8>
- Park, S., & Shin, D. (2023). Transformational leadership and school climate: Evidence from South Korean elementary schools. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 24(1), 89–102. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12186-023-09322-8>
- Rusmana, A., Fadhillah, T., & Yuliani, N. (2023). Leadership management and organizational culture in primary schools. *Jurnal Administrasi Pendidikan Indonesia*, 14(1), 91–105. <https://doi.org/10.21831/japi.v14i1.61112>
- Suriansyah, A., & Aslamiah, A. (2015). Character education implementation through school culture. *Jurnal Pendidikan Karakter*, 6(2), 131–144. <https://doi.org/10.21831/jpk.v6i2.8653>
- Tan, C., Ong, J., & Chua, S. (2021). Leadership for values education: Practices from Singaporean schools. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 104, 103323. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103323>
- Ulya, N., Rahmah, S., & Wahidah, I. (2024). Teachers' perspectives on challenges in implementing character education. *Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan Dasar*, 15(2), 58–73. <https://doi.org/10.21831/jipd.v15i2.60581>
- Virtanen, T., & Lerkkanen, M. (2020). Moral leadership and classroom management in Finnish basic education. *Educational Research*, 62(3), 249–264. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2020.1788972>
- Wahdah, N., Rahmawati, A., & Zulkarnain, D. (2023). The role of transformational leadership in creating collaborative school culture. *Jurnal Kepemimpinan Dan Supervisi Pendidikan*, 8(1), 33–47. <https://doi.org/10.23917/jksp.v8i1.62191>
- Zain, A. (2022). Evaluating school leadership practices for character development in Indonesian primary schools. *Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Indonesia*, 12(2), 155–170. <https://doi.org/10.21831/jmpi.v12i2.53381>