



# Principal Instructional Leadership in Building a Religious School Culture for Students' Character Development

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## ABSTRACT

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This study examines how instructional leadership enacted by madrasah principals strengthens students' religious character in Islamic primary education. The erosion of religious values among students in the context of globalization and digital culture presents a critical challenge for Islamic schools. Prior studies indicate that character education initiatives often remain fragmented and insufficiently integrated into school culture. This research employed a qualitative case study design at MI Hamzanwadi NW Gelogor, utilizing semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. Data were analyzed through data condensation, display, and verification to ensure analytical rigor. The findings indicate that strengthening religious character begins with participatory program planning informed by contextual needs and collective teacher involvement. Exemplary leadership practices, particularly the principal's direct engagement in daily religious activities, serve as a key mechanism for internalizing values. Continuous supervision and reflective evaluation further support program sustainability and teacher commitment. These interconnected practices foster a coherent religious school culture that embeds Islamic values into students' everyday experiences. The study contributes theoretically by framing religious character education as an organizational process mediated by instructional leadership and offers practical guidance for strengthening leadership capacity in Islamic schools. Future research is recommended to employ comparative and longitudinal designs across diverse educational contexts.

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## INTRODUCTION

The accelerating pace of globalization and digital transformation has fundamentally altered social structures, value systems, and educational priorities worldwide. Advances in information and communication technologies have

expanded access to knowledge while simultaneously intensifying exposure to global consumer culture, ideological pluralism, and moral relativism. For younger generations, these dynamics increasingly shape identity formation and life aspirations, often privileging material success, visibility, and instant gratification over spiritual depth and ethical responsibility. Empirical studies indicate that such conditions contribute to declining moral sensitivity and weakening religious commitment among students, as evidenced by behavioral deviations and reduced engagement in spiritual practices (Fadhilah et al., 2022). In this context, education is no longer viewed solely as a mechanism for cognitive development but as a critical social institution responsible for sustaining moral order and the continuity of values. Consequently, strengthening students' religious character has emerged as a strategic educational imperative with broad societal relevance, particularly in religious-based schooling systems.

Despite growing awareness of the importance of character education, contemporary educational institutions continue to face serious challenges in internalizing religious and moral values among students. The dominance of digital media and algorithm-driven content often marginalizes reflective learning and ethical contemplation, while global cultural flows blur traditional moral boundaries. Globalization, understood as an integrative process dissolving national, artistic, and ideological borders, further intensifies value contestation and identity confusion (Afifulloh, 2020). The digital revolution has not only increased the speed and volume of information transmission but has also reduced critical filtering mechanisms, making students more vulnerable to value disorientation (Muslim, 2023). Within this environment, schools, particularly Islamic educational institutions, are required to respond strategically. Without purposeful leadership and systematic character formation, religious education risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative and failing to counter external moral pressures effectively.

Field-level observations demonstrate that Islamic primary schools (*madrrasah ibtidaiyah*) increasingly position themselves as moral sanctuaries that integrate religious values into daily educational practices. However, the effectiveness of these efforts varies significantly across institutions. At Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Hamzanwadi NW Gelogor, a distinctive pattern emerges in which the madrasah principal actively designs, implements, and evaluates religious character-strengthening programs as part of the school's core instructional agenda. These initiatives extend beyond formal religious instruction to include structured habituation, collective worship, moral role modeling, and sustained collaboration with parents. This phenomenon aligns with broader societal trends showing increasing parental preference for Islamic schools that combine academic achievement with strong moral and spiritual formation. As such, MI

Hamzanwadi NW Gelogor represents a contextually rich case for examining how leadership practices shape religious school culture and student character development in practice.

Existing scholarship consistently highlights the pivotal role of school leadership in shaping institutional culture and student character outcomes. Instructional leadership, in particular, emphasizes learning quality, teacher professional development, academic supervision, and value internalization within everyday school practices (Hallinger, 2020; Ibrahim, 2024). Recent empirical studies confirm that principals' leadership styles significantly influence students' religious character, discipline, and moral behavior (Fathurrahman, 2025; Rahman et al., 2023). Musbiki (2021) further argues that religious character education must be embedded in routine school activities and supported collectively by all teachers. These findings suggest that leadership operates not merely as an administrative function but as a moral and cultural force that directs school transformation.

Despite these contributions, prior research exhibits several limitations. First, many studies conceptualize leadership broadly without explicitly examining instructional leadership as a distinct mechanism for religious character formation. Second, existing research often focuses on program outcomes rather than leadership processes, offering limited insight into how planning, habituation, modeling, and evaluation function as an integrated system. For example, Bunga Lafeyza Putri Denandry Sugiarto (2025) explores the role of madrasah principals in character formation but does not analyze instructional leadership as a strategic framework. Third, relatively few qualitative case studies investigate how leadership interacts with local culture, parental involvement, and institutional values simultaneously. These gaps underscore the need for process-oriented, context-sensitive research that captures the lived dynamics of instructional leadership in Islamic primary education.

Responding to these gaps, this study advances the field by positioning instructional leadership as a comprehensive strategy for strengthening students' religious character in madrasah settings. Unlike prior studies that emphasize isolated programs or leadership traits, this research foregrounds leadership practices as an interconnected system encompassing needs-based planning, systematic habituation, exemplary conduct, school-parent collaboration, and continuous evaluation. By employing a qualitative case study design, the study provides in-depth empirical evidence of how instructional leadership translates religious values into sustainable school culture. This approach represents a novel contribution to both instructional leadership theory and Islamic character education, particularly within the context of digital-era challenges.

Based on the above context, this study addresses the following research problem: How does instructional leadership exercised by a madrasah principal contribute to strengthening students' religious character? The central argument advanced is that instructional leadership functions as a transformative mechanism that aligns curriculum, pedagogy, school culture, and community engagement toward shared religious values. Through consistent role modeling, structured habituation, and collaborative governance, principals can institutionalize religious character as a lived practice rather than a symbolic ideal. This perspective challenges the assumption that character education is primarily the responsibility of religious subject teachers, instead positioning leadership as the primary driver of moral coherence within schools.

This study contributes theoretically by extending the discourse on instructional leadership into the domain of Islamic character education and, practically, by offering a replicable leadership model for madrasah principals. The findings provide evidence-based insights for policymakers, school leaders, and educators seeking to strengthen religious character amid globalization and digital disruption. By emphasizing leadership processes over isolated interventions, this research highlights pathways toward sustainable moral education and reinforces the strategic importance of value-oriented leadership in contemporary Islamic schooling.

## **METHOD**

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to examine in depth how instructional leadership exercised by a madrasah principal contributes to strengthening students' religious character. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for exploring socially constructed phenomena, leadership practices, and value-based processes that are context-dependent and cannot be meaningfully quantified (Creswell & Poth, 2023). The case study approach enables an intensive and holistic investigation of leadership practices within their natural setting, allowing researchers to capture interactions, meanings, and institutional dynamics as they unfold in real life (Yin, 2018; Sulaiman & Fauzi, 2022). In the context of Islamic education, instructional leadership is closely intertwined with school culture, moral habituation, and religious practices, making a qualitative case study the most suitable design for uncovering leadership processes that shape students' religious character (Rahman et al., 2023).

The study was conducted at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Hamzanwadi NW Gelogor, an Islamic primary school that has systematically implemented religious character-strengthening programs under the direct leadership of the madrasah principal. This site was purposively selected because it represents an

information-rich case, where instructional leadership is visibly embedded in planning, implementation, and evaluation processes (Patton, 2015; Ibrahim, 2024). The madrasah demonstrates consistent integration of religious values into instructional activities, daily routines, and school culture, aligning with recent findings that effective character education is highly dependent on leadership commitment and contextual coherence (Zainuddin & Karim, 2024). Furthermore, the school reflects broader societal demand for Islamic education institutions that balance academic achievement with moral and spiritual development, making it a relevant and meaningful research context.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, direct observations, and document analysis, allowing for methodological triangulation to enhance data credibility (Miles et al., 2022). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including the madrasah principal, the vice principal for student affairs, and Islamic religious education teachers. This technique allowed participants to articulate their experiences and perspectives freely while remaining aligned with the research focus (Creswell & Poth, 2023). Direct observations were carried out to capture leadership practices, religious routines, and teacher–student interactions within the natural school environment. Documentation analysis included school policies, program plans, evaluation reports, photographs, and records of religious activities. The integration of these techniques enabled a comprehensive understanding of instructional leadership practices in strengthening students' religious character (Fathurrahman, 2025).

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which comprises data condensation, data display, and drawing conclusions and verifying them (Miles et al., 2022). Data condensation involved selecting, focusing, and simplifying raw data related to instructional leadership and religious character formation. The reduced data were then organized and presented through thematic narratives and matrices during the data display stage to facilitate pattern recognition and interpretation (Rahman et al., 2023). Finally, conclusions were drawn through continuous cross-data-source comparison, followed by verification to ensure analytical rigor and trustworthiness. This iterative and cyclical process allowed for empirically grounded interpretations of how instructional leadership functions as a strategic mechanism for strengthening students' religious character (Ibrahim, 2024; Zainuddin & Karim, 2024).

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Result**

This section presents the study's empirical findings, derived from in-depth interviews, systematic observations, and document analysis conducted at MI Hamzanwadi NW Gelogor. The results are organized thematically to capture

how the madrasah principal's instructional leadership is enacted in strengthening students' religious character through program planning, leadership practices, and continuous supervision. The analysis focuses on patterns that emerged from multiple data sources, highlighting the interplay between strategic decision-making, daily religious practices, and evaluative mechanisms within the school context. By triangulating perspectives from key informants and observational evidence, the findings provide a comprehensive portrayal of how religious character education is operationalized at the institutional level. These results not only illustrate the lived realities of leadership practices in a madrasah setting but also offer empirically grounded insights into the mechanisms through which Islamic values are internalized and sustained in students' everyday school experiences.

### **Program Planning Strategy for Strengthening Students' Religious Character**

In this study, program planning strategy refers to a systematic, participatory process undertaken by the madrasah principal to design, implement, and institutionalize religious character-strengthening programs grounded in students' needs, the school context, and Islamic educational values. Operationally, this strategy encompasses needs analysis with teachers, alignment with the madrasah vision, the formulation of routine religious activities, and the integration of character values into daily school practices. In the field, program planning was not limited to administrative scheduling. However, it functioned as a value-driven instructional process aimed at embedding religious character into the school culture in a sustainable and structured manner.

An interview with the madrasah principal revealed that program planning begins with a collective reflection on students' moral and religious conditions. The principal stated: "We do not immediately design programs; first, we discuss what students really need in terms of religious behavior and discipline. Teachers are actively involved so the program reflects real classroom conditions." This statement indicates that planning is grounded in contextual needs rather than top-down directives. The researcher interprets this as evidence of instructional leadership, where the principal prioritizes pedagogical relevance and teacher participation to ensure that religious character programs are realistic, accepted, and effectively implemented.

A similar perspective was expressed by the religious education teacher, who emphasized the integrative nature of the planning process: "Religious character programs here are not only the responsibility of Islamic education teachers. All teachers contribute ideas, so religious values become part of every subject and daily routine." This interview result demonstrates that program planning extends beyond curricular boundaries and fosters collective ownership

among teachers. From the researcher’s perspective, this approach strengthens program sustainability because character education becomes embedded across instructional practices rather than isolated within specific religious lessons.

The deputy principal for student affairs further confirmed that program planning is closely linked to long-term character formation. According to the informant, “Programs are designed gradually, starting from simple daily habits, so students can internalize values naturally without feeling forced.” This reflects a developmental planning strategy emphasizing habituation and consistency. Analytically, such planning aligns with character education principles that stress gradual internalization through repeated practice, indicating that the principal’s planning strategy is pedagogically informed and developmentally appropriate.

Observational data supported interview findings. Researchers observed structured religious routines systematically implemented from morning arrival until the end of the school day, including greeting practices, Qur’anic recitation, congregational prayers, and reflective moments before lessons. These activities were not conducted sporadically but followed a clear schedule displayed in classrooms and teachers’ handbooks. The researcher interprets this as empirical evidence that program planning is translated into observable institutional practices, demonstrating coherence between planning, implementation, and daily school life.

Overall, the findings indicate that program planning at MI Hamzanwadi NW Gelogor is characterized by participatory decision-making, needs-based design, gradual habituation, and institutional integration. The data consistently show that planning is not merely procedural but value-oriented, aiming to transform religious character into a lived school culture. A clear pattern emerges in which inclusive planning leads to consistent implementation and strengthens teachers’ commitment to character education across instructional contexts.

Table 1. Influence of Program Planning Strategy on Religious Character Formation

<b>Informant Position</b>	<b>Interview Excerpt</b>	<b>Indicator</b>
Madrasah Principal	“We discuss students’ real needs first before designing any program.”	Needs-based planning
Religious Education Teacher	“All teachers are involved so religious values enter daily learning.”	Collaborative planning
Vice Principal (Student Affairs)	“Programs are designed gradually to form habits naturally.”	Habituation-oriented strategy

The table illustrates that informants consistently perceive program planning as a collaborative and needs-driven process. The principal’s emphasis on identifying students’ moral and behavioral needs highlights an instructional

leadership orientation that prioritizes relevance and effectiveness. Meanwhile, the religious education teacher's statement reinforces the idea that planning transcends subject boundaries, positioning religious character education as a shared institutional responsibility rather than a segmented instructional task.

Furthermore, the vice principal's focus on gradual habituation reveals a strategic awareness of how character is formed over time. Together, these indicators demonstrate a coherent planning model in which needs assessment, collaboration, and habituation operate synergistically. This pattern suggests that the effectiveness of religious character programs at MI Hamzanwadi NW Gelogor is strongly influenced by the quality of the planning process itself, rather than merely by the quantity of religious activities conducted.

The dominant pattern emerging from the data is participatory and habituation-based program planning, where inclusive decision-making leads to consistent implementation and sustained character internalization. This pattern underscores that well-planned religious programs, grounded in real needs and collective commitment, function as a foundational mechanism for strengthening students' religious character within the madrasah context.

### **The Role of the Madrasah Principal in Strengthening Religious Character**

In this study, the role of the madrasah principal in strengthening students' religious character is operationally defined as the principal's active instructional leadership manifested through exemplary behavior, participatory supervision, value-based decision-making, and continuous engagement in religious activities. In the field context, this role extends beyond administrative authority to include moral leadership, where the principal functions as a role model, facilitator, and cultural architect who consistently reinforces Islamic values through daily practices and institutional norms.

An interview with the madrasah principal highlighted the importance of leading by example. The principal stated: "If the principal does not participate in religious activities, teachers and students will not take them seriously. I always try to be present in prayers and religious routines." This statement illustrates that leadership legitimacy in religious character education is built through visible commitment rather than verbal instruction alone. The researcher interprets this finding as evidence that exemplary leadership functions as a powerful mechanism for internalizing religious values, fostering authenticity and moral authority within the school community.

Similarly, the deputy principal for student affairs emphasized the influence of the principal's daily behavior on students. The informant noted: "Students imitate what they see. When the principal greets them politely and prays with them, students follow naturally." This interview result indicates that

the principal's conduct serves as a living curriculum for character education. From the researcher's perspective, this confirms that modeling is a central instructional strategy, enabling students to internalize religious values through observation and repetition rather than coercion.

The data reveal a clear flow within this sub-theme: exemplary leadership → habituation → value internalization. The principal's consistent participation in religious routines initiates habituation among teachers and students, which over time leads to the internalization of religious values. This leadership flow demonstrates that religious character strengthening is not achieved through isolated programs but through sustained moral presence and daily engagement. The researcher interprets this flow as an embodiment of instructional leadership that integrates moral, pedagogical, and cultural dimensions.

Observations conducted during school hours showed the principal actively involved in congregational prayers, standing alongside students and teachers rather than supervising from a distance. Students were observed entering the prayer space in an orderly manner, following established procedures without external enforcement. The researcher interprets this as empirical evidence that the principal's presence reinforces discipline and reverence, transforming religious activities into meaningful communal practices rather than formal obligations.



Figure 1. Students Performing Congregational Prayer at MI Hamzanwadi NW Gelogor

In summary, the findings indicate that the madrasah principal's role in strengthening students' religious character is enacted through exemplary leadership, direct engagement, and continuous supervision. The principal's consistent moral presence shapes students' behavior patterns and reinforces religious values across daily routines. A dominant pattern emerges in which leadership by example cultivates habituation, leading to the sustainable internalization of religious character within the madrasah environment.

Table 2. Influence of the Madrasah Principal's Role on Religious Character Formation

Informant Position	Interview Excerpt	Indicator
Madrasah Principal	"I always participate in prayers so students see that it matters."	Exemplary leadership
Vice Principal (Student Affairs)	"Students imitate what they see from the principal."	Role modeling
Religious Education Teacher	"The principal's presence makes religious routines consistent."	Moral supervision

The table demonstrates that all informants consistently perceive the principal's role as central to the success of religious character education. The emphasis on exemplary leadership highlights that authority in Islamic educational settings is morally constructed through action rather than position. When the principal models religious discipline, it creates a normative standard that teachers and students are motivated to follow.

Moreover, the convergence of indicators exemplary leadership, role modeling, and moral supervision suggests that the principal's influence operates at both behavioral and cultural levels. This pattern indicates that religious character formation is strengthened when leadership is visible, participatory, and value-oriented. The data imply that instructional leadership in madrasahs must integrate moral presence as a core component to sustain religious culture.

The dominant pattern identified is exemplary instructional leadership driving habituation and value internalization. The principal's consistent moral engagement creates a ripple effect, encouraging teachers' commitment and students' voluntary participation in religious practices. This pattern underscores the centrality of leadership behavior in shaping a religious school culture that is both disciplined and spiritually meaningful.

### Program Evaluation and Continuous Supervision

In this study, program evaluation and continuous supervision are operationally defined as a systematic and ongoing process conducted by the madrasah principal to monitor, assess, and refine religious character-strengthening programs. In the field, evaluation is not treated as a one-time administrative activity but as a reflective leadership practice involving periodic review meetings, direct classroom and activity supervision, feedback to teachers, and coordination with external stakeholders, particularly the foundation. Continuous supervision functions as a quality assurance mechanism to ensure the consistency, relevance, and sustainability of religious character education within the madrasah.

Table 3. Interview Evidence on Program Evaluation and Continuous Supervision

Interview Excerpt	Indicator	Informant
"Evaluation is not only at the end of the year; we discuss it regularly with teachers."	Periodic evaluation	Madrasah Principal
"Teachers receive feedback after religious activities so we can improve implementation."	Instructional supervision	Vice Principal (Student Affairs)
"The foundation is involved in major evaluations to align programs with institutional goals."	External stakeholder involvement	Madrasah Principal

The table indicates that program evaluation at MI Hamzanwadi NW Gelogor is conducted through a multi-layered approach that combines periodic internal reviews with instructional supervision. The principal's emphasis on regular evaluation meetings reflects a reflective leadership orientation, where improvement is viewed as an ongoing process rather than an outcome. This practice enables teachers to continually adjust strategies to strengthen students' religious character, ensuring that programs remain responsive to students' behavioral development and contextual challenges.

Furthermore, the foundation's involvement in major evaluation processes demonstrates an expanded supervisory framework that integrates internal and external accountability. By aligning school-level practices with foundation policies, the principal strengthens institutional coherence and resource support for religious character programs. From the researcher's perspective, this approach enhances program legitimacy and sustainability, as evaluation outcomes are not only pedagogically grounded but also institutionally endorsed.

Observational data corroborate interview findings. Researchers observed regular coaching sessions in which the principal discussed teachers' performance in guiding religious activities, provided constructive feedback, and encouraged reflective dialogue. Evaluation outcomes were documented in meeting notes and followed by concrete action plans. The researcher interprets this as evidence that evaluation and supervision are embedded in the madrasah's daily management culture, reinforcing continuous improvement rather than compliance-oriented control.

In summary, the findings reveal that program evaluation and continuous supervision at MI Hamzanwadi NW Gelogor are implemented through regular reflection, instructional feedback, and collaborative oversight involving the foundation. These practices ensure that religious character-strengthening programs are consistently monitored and refined. A clear pattern emerges: reflective evaluation leads to adaptive supervision, thereby supporting the sustained internalization of religious values among students.

Table 4. Ideal Influence of Evaluation and Supervision on Religious Character Formation

Informant Position	Interview Excerpt	Indicator
Madrasah Principal	"We evaluate programs regularly so religious values stay consistent."	Reflective leadership
Vice Principal (Student Affairs)	"Supervision helps teachers stay focused on character goals."	Continuous supervision
Religious Education Teacher	"Feedback motivates us to improve religious activities."	Professional support

Table 2 indicates that informants perceive evaluation and supervision as supportive rather than punitive processes. The principal's reflective leadership encourages teachers to view evaluation as an opportunity for professional growth, which strengthens their commitment to religious character education. This supportive climate fosters trust and openness, enabling teachers to engage more deeply in program refinement.

Additionally, the convergence of indicators reflective leadership, continuous supervision, and professional support suggests that evaluation functions as a mechanism for sustaining religious culture. The data indicate that when supervision is continuous and dialogical, teachers are more likely to implement religious values in instructional and extracurricular activities consistently. This reinforces the idea that practical program evaluation is integral to long-term character development.

The dominant pattern identified is reflective evaluation integrated with continuous instructional supervision. This pattern demonstrates that systematic monitoring, collaborative reflection, and adaptive feedback collectively strengthen the sustainability and effectiveness of religious character-building programs. Through this approach, the madrasah principal ensures that religious values are not only planned and modeled but also consistently evaluated and reinforced across all levels of school practice.

## Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that strengthening students' religious character in Islamic primary education is most effective when leadership practices are embedded within a coherent system of participatory planning, exemplary conduct, and reflective supervision. The planning processes observed at MI Hamzanwadi demonstrate that character education initiatives grounded in contextual needs analysis and collective teacher involvement foster more substantial program ownership and sustainability. This aligns with prior research emphasizing that religious character formation is not the result of sporadic activities but of structured, routine practices integrated into the school's

daily life (Musbiki, 2021; Nurizah, 2024). Unlike approaches that prioritize formal policy documents alone, the present study highlights how participatory program design transforms abstract religious values into lived institutional practices, supporting the ecological perspective of character education proposed in recent Islamic education studies (Sulaiman & Fauzi, 2022; Maarif, 2024).

Leadership behavior emerged as a critical mediating factor in translating planned programs into meaningful student experiences. The principal's visible involvement in religious routines functioned as a powerful mechanism for value internalization, reinforcing the argument that moral leadership operates through embodiment rather than symbolic authority alone. This finding corroborates studies that position exemplary leadership as central to shaping ethical school culture in madrasahs (Nurkholis, 2024; Asykur, 2024). However, the present study extends this literature by demonstrating that exemplarity is most influential when enacted within participatory and collaborative structures that engage teachers as co-agents of character education. This supports the view that instructional leadership in faith-based schools is relational and distributed rather than hierarchical (Zainuddin & Karim, 2024).

Sustained program effectiveness was further reinforced by systematic evaluation and continuous supervision. Regular reflective meetings, instructional monitoring, and collaborative evaluations with external stakeholders functioned not merely as accountability mechanisms but as developmental tools for professional growth. This approach is consistent with contemporary perspectives that conceptualize evaluation as a formative and dialogical process supporting teacher capacity and program refinement (Rahman et al., 2023; Ridwan, 2024). In contrast to compliance-oriented evaluation models reported in some Islamic schooling contexts, the evaluative practices observed in this study promoted alignment between institutional vision, teacher practice, and student behavior, thereby strengthening program coherence over time (Ibrahim, 2024).

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings contribute to the literature on instructional leadership and character education by illustrating how moral formation is sustained through the interplay of planning, modeling, and reflective supervision. Rather than treating religious character education as an additive program, the study supports a systems-oriented model in which leadership practices simultaneously shape organizational culture and habitual student behavior. This perspective advances existing frameworks by demonstrating the mediating role of leadership processes in connecting institutional values with individual moral development (Maarif, 2024; Nurizah, 2024). It also reinforces the argument that character education in Islamic schools must be understood as an organizational phenomenon, not merely a pedagogical

one (Sulaiman & Fauzi, 2022).

Practically, the study underscores the importance of leadership capacity development that integrates participatory planning skills, moral exemplarity, and reflective supervision competencies. School leaders are encouraged to move beyond program formalization toward cultivating shared responsibility and consistent moral practice across school stakeholders. Policymakers and educational foundations may draw on these insights to design leadership training and evaluation frameworks that prioritize process quality and institutional culture. Ultimately, the findings suggest that strengthening students' religious character requires not isolated interventions but a coherent leadership ecosystem capable of adapting religious values to contemporary educational dynamics while maintaining their normative foundations.

## CONCLUSION

This study offers an important lesson on how religious character education in Islamic primary schools is most effectively strengthened through an integrated leadership ecosystem rather than through isolated programs or symbolic policies. The central insight emerging from this research is that instructional leadership, when enacted through participatory program planning, exemplary conduct, and continuous supervision, creates a sustainable institutional culture that internalizes religious values in students' daily practices. The qualitative case study approach revealed that religious character formation is not merely the outcome of curricular instruction but is shaped by habitual experiences embedded within the school's organizational life. The findings demonstrate that the principal's role extends beyond administrative coordination to moral leadership that models values, aligns teacher commitment, and ensures program continuity through reflective evaluation. This holistic approach enables the consistent reinforcement of religious values across the instructional, extracurricular, and social dimensions of schooling. As a result, students' religious character development becomes a lived experience rather than a conceptual ideal, highlighting the transformative potential of instructional leadership in responding to contemporary moral challenges posed by globalization and digital culture.

From a scholarly perspective, this study advances Islamic educational leadership literature by offering an empirically grounded model that integrates instructional leadership with religious character education. Methodologically, the use of in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis provides a nuanced understanding of leadership practices within their natural context. The study strengthens theoretical discussions by positioning religious character education as an organizational and cultural process mediated by

leadership practices. Nevertheless, this research is limited by its single-case design, which restricts the generalizability of findings across diverse institutional contexts. Future research is encouraged to employ comparative or multi-site studies to examine variations in leadership strategies across different madrasah settings. Longitudinal designs may also provide deeper insights into the long-term impact of leadership practices on students' moral development. Additionally, future studies could examine the roles of digital leadership and parental engagement in strengthening religious character, particularly in response to evolving sociocultural and technological dynamics.

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