



# The Impact of School Principals on Graduate Quality Through Character Education Initiatives

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## ABSTRACT

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This article aims to delve into the multifaceted process of character education with principals, focusing on the pivotal roles of teachers and educational staff. Drawing from qualitative research and philosophical insights, we examine three critical stages of character development: building teacher character with principal leadership, fostering the character of educational staff, and nurturing student character in madrasah. Data were obtained through interviews, documentation, and observation. Through a comprehensive analysis, we underscore the significance of teacher character as the cornerstone of character education, emphasizing the importance of embodying values such as integrity, morality, and trustworthiness. By synthesizing research findings and philosophical perspectives, this article aims to provide valuable insights and recommendations for enhancing character education in madrasahs, ultimately fostering the growth of students who exemplify integrity, compassion, and resilience in their everyday lives. Disciplined attitudes and democratic leadership are certainly an adequate basis for building the quality of graduates, and this is built through cultural and character education as national education goals.

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## INTRODUCTION

Leadership in education serves as the cornerstone of effective school management and student development (Shava et al., 2021; Amini et al., 2021). Principals, in particular, play a pivotal role in shaping educational institutions' culture, direction, and success. This success is, of course, also a national educational goal. National education aims not only to make the nation's life more intelligent, but also to have noble goals, including the welfare of the people within it (Kristianti et al., 2021). Their leadership styles, strategies, and vision significantly impact not only the academic achievements but also the holistic development of students. As educational paradigms continue to evolve, the importance of effective leadership in fostering positive outcomes for learners becomes increasingly evident.

Principals drive school improvement efforts, guiding teachers, staff, and students toward shared goals and aspirations (Shava et al., 2021). Strategic

planning, collaboration, and effective decision-making create an environment conducive to learning, growth, and innovation (Priyambodo & Hasanah, 2021). Furthermore, effective leadership fosters a sense of community and belonging within schools, promoting student engagement, motivation, and overall well-being.

In today's rapidly changing world, characterized by technological advancements, globalization, and societal complexities, the role of school leaders has become even more critical (Kilicoglu & Kilicoglu, 2020). They are tasked with ensuring academic excellence and preparing students to navigate the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century (Desti et al., 2023). Thus, the importance of leadership in education cannot be overstated, as it directly influences the quality of teaching and learning experiences and ultimately shapes the future of society.

In the contemporary landscape of education, the quality of graduates serves as a barometer of success for educational institutions (Santos et al., 2020). As such, the phenomenon of school leadership is intrinsically tied to the caliber of graduates they produce (Gunawan et al., 2024). Beyond the conventional metrics of academic achievement, the accurate measure of educational success lies in the holistic development of students—encompassing cognitive skills, socio-emotional competencies, and ethical values.

School principals, as the primary leaders within educational settings, exert a profound influence on the trajectory of student outcomes (Bellibaş et al., 2022). Their leadership styles, decisions, and priorities reverberate throughout the school environment, shaping students' educational experiences and ultimately impacting their preparedness for future endeavors (Purwanto, 2021). A principal's commitment to fostering a culture of excellence, cultivating a supportive learning environment, and promoting inclusive practices directly correlates with the quality of graduates emerging from their institution.

There has been a paradigm shift in educational discourse in recent years, emphasizing the importance of character education alongside academic attainment. Character education encompasses the deliberate cultivation of virtues such as integrity, empathy, resilience, and ethical reasoning – attributes essential for success in both personal and professional domains (Sholihah et al., 2023). Recognizing the integral role of character in shaping individuals' lives, schools are increasingly prioritizing character education initiatives to nurture well-rounded graduates equipped to thrive in diverse contexts (Martinez & Partin, 2023).

The intersection of leadership and character education is particularly poignant, as principals serve as exemplars and architects of ethical school cultures (Olcott et al., 2023; Budiyo, 2023). Their commitment to promoting values-driven education, fostering positive relationships, and instilling a sense of

civic responsibility lays the groundwork for the holistic development of students (Bryan & Mochizuki, 2023). By championing character education within their institutions, principals not only enhance the quality of graduates but also contribute to the cultivation of compassionate and socially responsible citizens.

In this context, exploring the intricate nexus between leadership, character education, and graduates' quality unveils the multifaceted dimensions of educational leadership. By delving deeper into this dynamic relationship, we gain insights into the transformative potential of principled leadership in shaping future generations of leaders, innovators, and change-makers (Hallema, 2022; Nurrohmah & Wulandari, 2021). As we navigate the complexities of modern education, it becomes increasingly evident that effective leadership, grounded in principles of integrity and compassion, is indispensable for nurturing excellence in graduates.

In the realm of educational leadership, a rich tapestry of research illuminates the pivotal role of school principals in shaping the educational landscape (Andrin et al., 2024; Abella et al., 2024; Tiongzon et al., 2024; Bagacina et al., 2024; Lailiyah & Imami, 2023). Scholars have extensively studied various dimensions of principal leadership, uncovering insights into leadership styles, practices, and their profound impact on school climate and student outcomes. Transformational leadership, emphasizing vision-setting and empowerment, has emerged as influential in driving positive school outcomes. Moreover, distributed leadership, characterized by decentralized decision-making, has been lauded for fostering collaboration and enhancing student achievement. Within this context, the correlation between principal leadership and the quality of graduates stands as a cornerstone of educational discourse.

Principals prioritizing instructional leadership and creating a positive school climate have been associated with improved academic performance and higher graduation rates (Rodrigues & Ávila de Lima, 2021; Hakim & Saryulis, 2023). However, amidst the evolving educational landscape, there has been a notable shift towards recognizing the importance of character education in schools (Bozkurt et al., 2022). Principals, as architects of school culture, play a central role in promoting character development initiatives (Ryu et al., 2022; Atasoy, 2020; González-Falcón et al., 2020). By integrating character education into the school's mission and vision, they cultivate ethical behavior, empathy, and civic responsibility among students (Suhifatullah et al., 2021; Kusmawati et al., 2022). While existing research provides valuable insights into these interconnected realms of leadership, graduate quality, and character education, there remain gaps in understanding the nuanced mechanisms through which principal leadership influences these outcomes (Kudrats & Brown, 2021; Pan & Songco, 2023; Muharnis & Fadriati, 2023; Sobari et al., 2023). Addressing these

gaps is paramount for informing effective leadership practices and advancing the broader discourse on educational leadership and character development.

One notable gap pertains to the need for more nuanced investigations into the specific leadership practices and strategies principals employ to foster character development among students. While studies have highlighted the importance of principals in promoting character education initiatives, there remains limited understanding of the mechanisms through which these initiatives translate into tangible outcomes for students (Kalla et al., 2022; Armstrong et al., 2021; Lembong et al., 2023; Bengu, 2023). Does this prove that leadership can be implemented and proven in such a way? This question arises with the assumption that education will continue to develop and meet the challenges in the future.

More research is needed to explore how leadership styles impact graduate quality and character development. While transformational leadership is well-studied, others, like transactional or servant leadership, still need to be noticed (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023; Serang, 2021). Longitudinal studies are needed to understand the lasting effects of principal-led character education initiatives on students' development. Additionally, the role of contextual factors like school culture and socio-economic backgrounds in shaping the effectiveness of these initiatives needs to be sufficiently explored (Barker et al., 2023; Niehues et al., 2020). Bridging these gaps is crucial for a deeper understanding of how school leadership influences graduate outcomes and character education.

Emerging trends in educational leadership research emphasize character education's innovative integration into school leadership practices (Kilicoglu & Kilicoglu, 2020; Jerdborg, 2022). While previous studies have predominantly focused on academic outcomes, there is a growing recognition of the importance of holistic development, including character virtues, in preparing students for success in life. Novel research in this domain seeks to explore innovative approaches to character education within the framework of principal leadership.

One novelty research area involves exploring technology-enabled character education interventions led by school principals. With the proliferation of digital platforms and online learning resources, principals can leverage technology to promote student character development (Sá & Serpa, 2020; Sulasmi, 2022). Whether through interactive online modules, virtual character-building exercises, or social media campaigns, technology offers new avenues for principals to instill ethical values and foster a sense of community among students.

Another emerging area of research focuses on the role of culturally responsive leadership in promoting character education in diverse school settings. Principals who demonstrate cultural humility, sensitivity to students'

diverse backgrounds, and a commitment to inclusive practices are better positioned to foster a culture of respect, empathy, and understanding (Pham et al., 2022). Novel research in this area examines how culturally responsive leadership practices can enhance the effectiveness of character education initiatives and promote equitable outcomes for all students.

There is a growing interest in exploring the intersectionality between character education and social-emotional learning (SEL) within the context of principal leadership (McCall et al., 2023; Rohmah et al., 2023). SEL programs focus on developing students' self-awareness, social skills, and responsible decision-making and share common goals with character education initiatives. Novel research investigates how principals can integrate SEL competencies into their character education efforts, fostering holistic development and resilience among students.

By exploring these novel avenues of research, scholars can contribute to the ongoing discourse on educational leadership and character education, offering fresh perspectives and innovative solutions to the complex challenges facing schools today (Fessehatsion & Peng, 2021; Bunnell, 2021). As principals navigate the ever-evolving landscape of education, embracing novel approaches to character education within their leadership practices holds the promise of cultivating a new generation of ethical, compassionate, and socially responsible citizens.

The purpose of this article is to provide a comprehensive exploration of the leadership role of school principals in improving the quality of graduates through character education in MTsN 3 Banyuwangi. By synthesizing existing literature and identifying research gaps, this article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted relationship between principal leadership, graduate outcomes, and character development (Abella et al., 2024; Cordova Jr et al., 2024). Through an analysis of the current state of research, we seek to highlight the significance of principled leadership in fostering academic success and students' ethical and social-emotional well-being.

This article offers insights and recommendations for policymakers, educational leaders, and practitioners seeking to enhance character education initiatives within their schools. By elucidating how principal leadership influences graduate quality and character development, we aim to inform evidence-based practices that promote holistic student growth and prepare them for success in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. By advancing our understanding of the intersection between leadership, character education, and graduate outcomes, we aspire to inspire meaningful action and innovation in educational leadership practices, ultimately contributing to cultivating compassionate, ethical, and socially responsible individuals.

## RESEARCH METHODS

In a groundbreaking research endeavor conducted at MTsN 3 Banyuwangi, the journey of the article is to delve into the intricacies of educational leadership and character development. Employing a descriptive qualitative research method, the study sought to unravel the multifaceted role of school principals in enhancing the quality of graduates through character education initiatives (Allan, 2020). It was situated within the dynamic context of MTsN 3 Banyuwangi, renowned for its commitment to holistic student development. The research aimed to illuminate the nuanced interplay between principal leadership practices, graduate outcomes, and the cultivation of ethical values.

To achieve comprehensive insights, the research team employed diverse data collection methods, including observation, interviews, and documentation analysis (Ezer & Aksüt, 2021; Ruslin et al., 2022). Through systematic observation, researchers gained firsthand insights into the daily interactions and practices within the school environment, capturing the essence of principal leadership in action. In-depth interviews with school administrators, teachers, and students provided rich qualitative data, offering perspectives from various stakeholders on the influence of leadership on character education and graduate quality. The data is then analyzed, and documentation is analyzed, encompassing examination of school policies, curriculum materials, and student records, supplemented by the empirical findings, enriching the understanding of the contextual factors shaping character development initiatives. Employing a rigorous data triangulation approach, the research team synthesized and analyzed the findings from multiple sources, ensuring the validity and reliability of the study's conclusions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Leadership theory encompasses diverse perspectives and approaches to understanding and improving leadership effectiveness within various contexts. Leadership theory emphasizes empowering individuals to influence and inspire others toward shared goals and visions (Perera et al., 2021; Ajanaku & Lubbe, 2021). Character education plays a fundamental role in leadership development, as it cultivates essential virtues and values such as integrity, empathy, and resilience, which are crucial for ethical and impactful leadership (Sahri & Soleh, 2023). Leaders embody these virtues, inspire trust and respect, and foster inclusive and collaborative environments where individuals can thrive and contribute meaningfully (Carvajal et al., 2023). Moreover, the quality of graduates produced by educational institutions heavily relies on effective leadership practices prioritizing character development alongside academic and

technical skills (Adhikari & Shrestha, 2023; Prasetyo et al., 2022). By integrating leadership theory into educational curricula and fostering a character education culture, institutions can nurture graduates with the expertise and competencies required for success and the ethical grounding and interpersonal skills needed to lead with integrity and make positive contributions to society.

### **Principal Leadership Builds a Culture of Student Character**

Leadership itself can be understood as a set of processes to influence, encourage, invite, guide, mobilize, and force, if necessary, individuals or groups to accept this influence and then do something that can help achieve specific goals that have been set (Lembong et al., 2023). Moreover, there is a monitoring process (controlling) so that achieving goals can proceed according to the agreed plans. The madrasa head himself can be interpreted as a functional teacher with the additional task of leading an organization, including teaching and learning activities (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023; Sanjani et al., 2023). So, the madrasa head's leadership strategy is a set of systematic processes that influence the teaching and education staff to achieve educational goals, from planning to the evaluation stage.

In the context of MTsN 3 Banyuwangi, the madrasa head's leadership strategy encompasses a multifaceted approach aimed at achieving educational objectives while nurturing character development among students. Rooted in the principles of influence, encouragement, guidance, and mobilization, the strategy is designed to inspire a shared vision and foster collective action toward common goals. By leveraging these processes, the madrasa head facilitates a dynamic and supportive organizational culture where teaching and learning thrive.

At the core of the leadership strategy is a commitment to continuous monitoring and evaluation, ensuring that progress aligns with established plans and objectives (Abella et al., 2024; Arifin et al., 2024). Through diligent oversight and control mechanisms, the madrasa head navigates challenges, adjusts strategies, and optimizes resources to maximize outcomes. This monitoring process facilitates accountability and promotes adaptability and innovation in response to evolving educational needs and contexts.

The leadership strategy of the madrasa head extends beyond administrative duties to encompass the cultivation of a values-driven ethos within the school community (Hakim & Saryulis, 2023). The madrasa head instills character virtues essential for students' holistic development and future success by fostering a culture of integrity, empathy, and social responsibility. Through purposeful engagement and dialogue, the madrasa head inspires trust, collaboration, and a shared commitment to excellence, empowering staff and students to realize their full potential. Thus, the leadership strategy of the

madrassa head at MTsN 3 Banyuwangi catalyzes educational innovation, character formation, and collective achievement in pursuit of the institution's overarching mission and vision.

The principal of MTsN 3 Banyuwangi carries out duties and responsibilities as a school leader who is usually called the principal. The principal must, of course, strive to build an effective school in all respects. To achieve effectiveness, the principal in managing education must at least have several important things, including political abilities, which include elements of influence and negotiation, teaching abilities as part of the teaching staff or teachers, interpersonal skills as someone who can communicate and interact well, as well as technical skills, namely also acting as an educational staff. In review, the foundation of the principal's leadership at MTsN 3 Banyuwangi is integrated with an environment-based school, as stated in the school's vision, mission, and goals. Leadership is critical in pursuing the quality of graduates that every school desires. Schools can progress only with visionary leaders with managerial skills and personality integrity to improve the quality of graduates.

The strength of MTsN 3 Banyuwangi in improving the quality of graduates is that the principal has a disciplined personal foundation as his foundation, which is then used to influence the entire school academic community to be disciplined and then instilled in each individual. At the same time, the democratic leadership style in the school, in terms of communication and coordination, is aspirational (bottom-up). Then, there are efforts to prepare an organizational structure and adapt it to the 2013 Minister of Religion Regulation number 90 concerning the implementation of school education and acculturate it with the socio-cultural conditions and school climate so that the harmonious conditions of the school are maintained intact and safe. Furthermore, a harmonious relationship with the community grows due to trust being one of the supporting factors in improving the quality of graduates at MTsN 3 Banyuwangi. The student's parents also support it.

### **Quality of Graduates with Character**

In practice, madrasas often experience dynamic fluctuations. Upon the author's initial tenure as a mathematics teacher at MTs Negeri Srono in 2011, the institution's conditions needed to align with prior expectations. At that time, MTsN 3 Banyuwangi, previously known as MTs Negeri Srono, designated as a Model Tsanawiyah Madrasah in 1998, had not fully realized its potential. Critical requirements for a superior madrasah included superior educational human resources, effective management, a conducive educational environment, and community trust and support. However, the institution needed to improve in several aspects. The environment appeared neglected, with poor maintenance of

plants and inadequate infrastructure, which, in turn, correlated with character issues among students. Student delinquency persisted, underscoring the insufficient development of noble values such as honesty, politeness, and discipline.

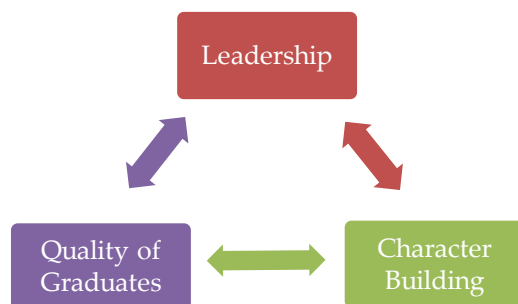
Madrasah, an educational institution rooted in Islamic values, emphasizes moral education, exemplified through everyday conduct. Ideally, madrasas mirror the character of Islamic boarding schools, instilling religious knowledge and encouraging its practical application in daily life (Priyambodo & Hasanah, 2021; Nurrohmah & Wulandari, 2021). They play a crucial role in shaping students' character, aiming to foster an Islamic and Quranic generation. Beyond knowledge transfer, madrasas prioritize cultivating students' soft skills, ensuring that acquired knowledge translates into tangible actions in real-life scenarios. A critical factor for educational success in madrasas lies in the dedication of teachers. Teachers are not mere placeholders but agents of change, mentors, and character shapers. Effective educators possess strong communication skills, facilitating students' comprehension and absorption of conveyed lessons, thus enabling holistic development beyond academics.

Starting the construction of a madrasa system is akin to laying the foundation of a physical building - it requires meticulous planning and strong communication to ensure its strength and resilience (Purwanto et al., 2023; Prasetyo et al., 2022). However, building a madrasa system is far more complex and challenging as it involves understanding and uniting diverse visions and missions. Education in a madrasa flourishes when teachers actively shape students' character. They serve as role models and inspirations, with their actions often speaking louder than words. For instance, a simple act like picking up litter in the madrasa yard can leave a lasting impression on students, illustrating the importance of real-life examples in character education.

At its core, character education is a deliberate effort to nurture students' potential and cultivate their character to better themselves and their communities (McCall et al., 2023; Rohmah et al., 2023). It involves instilling values, fostering awareness, and encouraging action aligned with those values. This process closely intertwines with moral education, aiming to refine students' abilities to become better individuals continuously. In the context of a madrasa, the responsibility of character development primarily lies with teachers and education staff. However, regulations within the madrasa also shape students' experiences, providing them with stimuli, challenges, and opportunities for growth.

Establishing a robust character education system that engages all stakeholders within the madrasa community is imperative to effectively instill character and quality education. By involving everyone in the process, from

teachers to administrators to students, a cohesive effort can be made to produce students who embody character, progress, achievement, and excellence. This collaborative approach ensures that character education becomes an integral part of the madrasa's ethos, guiding students toward becoming knowledgeable and courageous individuals who dare to express their thoughts and ideas.



**Chart of Connection Leadership**

In general, the character-building process in madrasas unfolds in three key stages. Firstly, there is the pivotal task of building a teacher's character. Teachers serve as the cornerstone of madrasa character development, as the progress or decline of the institution heavily relies on their demeanor and values. Cultivating teachers with solid character is thus paramount in shaping students with similar virtues. In Javanese philosophy, teachers are revered as models of trustworthiness and exemplary conduct, ingrained with the ideals of integrity and morality. As such, teachers are not merely disseminators of knowledge but also educators of ethics and integrity, instilling these values through their actions and interactions with students.

Subsequently, the focus shifts to building the character of the educational staff. Although they may not directly teach lessons, educational staff play a crucial role in facilitating learning activities and fostering a conducive learning environment. Their presence contributes to the madrasa community's overall administration, security, and peace, thereby supporting the implementation of character education programs. By embodying the values they seek to instill in students, educational staff further reinforce the importance of character development within the madrasa.

Finally, the culmination of the character-building process lies in nurturing student character. Teachers, akin to second parents, play a pivotal role in molding students into individuals with strong moral fiber. Teachers foster an environment conducive to character development through nurturing guidance, gentle communication, and avoidance of discriminatory or harsh practices. The ultimate aim of education extends beyond academic achievement to encompass cultivating students with robust character traits. Achieving this goal demands

time, consistency, patience, and collaborative efforts from parents, teachers, and education personnel, who collectively play a central role in guiding students toward virtuous conduct and ethical behavior.

## CONCLUSION

In synthesizing the studies and discussions explored above, several critical conclusions emerge regarding the process of character education in madrasas. Firstly, the character of teachers stands out as the foundational element, serving as the bedrock upon which students' moral development is built. Their embodiment of values such as integrity and trustworthiness makes them pivotal role models for impressionable minds. Secondly, the inclusive involvement of educational staff emerges as equally vital. While teachers take the lead in direct instruction, the collective efforts of all staff members contribute to creating a nurturing and conducive learning environment essential for character development.

Furthermore, the overarching goal of character education in madrasas extends beyond academic achievement to encompass the holistic development of students' moral and ethical values. Teachers, assuming the role of mentors akin to second parents, guide students through nurturing guidance and constructive communication, fostering an environment conducive to character growth. Finally, achieving a sustainable impact in character education necessitates collaborative efforts from various stakeholders, including teachers, educational staff, parents, and the wider madrasa community. By fostering a cohesive approach grounded in shared values and mutual support, madrasas aspire to cultivate students who excel academically and exhibit integrity, compassion, and resilience in their daily lives.

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