



An Integrated Principal Leadership Model for Building a Character-Based School Climate in Elementary Schools

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Abstract : The success of character development among elementary school students is greatly influenced by the creation of a supportive school environment and effective principal leadership. This study aims to describe and analyze the principal's leadership model in fostering a character-based school climate in elementary schools. The research was conducted from February to May 2026 using a qualitative approach and case study method at SDN 201 Sukaluyu, Bandung. The research participants consisted of one principal, five teachers, two parents, and one school committee member selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis, then analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive model, which includes data condensation, data presentation, and the drawing and verification of conclusions. The credibility of the findings was strengthened through source triangulation and methodological triangulation. The research results indicate that the principal's leadership plays a strategic role in fostering a character-based school climate through six mutually integrated components: a character vision grounded in discipline and independence; the principal's exemplary leadership; an integrated character education program; collaboration among the school, parents, and the school committee; continuous monitoring; and the establishment of a school climate characterized by religiosity, discipline, independence, environmental care, and collaboration. Character education is implemented through various integrated programs, including religious activities, the Adiwiyata Program, the Environment-Based School Program, literacy activities, the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), and the Pancawaluya Task Force. This study produced a model of school principal leadership that integrates a character-based vision, exemplary leadership, character-based programs, school-community collaboration, and continuous monitoring in building a character-based school climate. The findings of this study contribute to the development of research on educational leadership and character education and provide practical implications for elementary schools in strengthening student character development through a sustainable school climate.

Keywords: principal leadership, character-based school climate, character education, educational leadership, elementary school.

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How to Cite :

Introduction

Character education is one of the primary goals of national education, playing a role in shaping students who possess not only academic abilities but also moral values, responsibility, discipline, social awareness, and the ability to live in society. At the elementary school level, character education is particularly important because this

phase is a period for the formation of habits, attitudes, and values that will influence students' development in subsequent stages. However, schools still face various challenges in building students' character, such as low levels of discipline, responsibility, and environmental awareness, as well as the influence of technological advancements and digital media that can affect children's behavior. Therefore, strengthening character education must be carried out systematically through various educational activities integrated into the school culture (Lickona, 1991; Kristjánsson, 2021). Furthermore, advancements in technology and digital media require school principals to act not only as school administrators but also as instructional leaders capable of guiding the positive use of technology to support the development of students' character (Bustamam et al., 2022).

The success of character education depends not only on the learning process in the classroom but is also influenced by the leadership of the school principal. The principal plays a strategic role in defining the school's vision, building organizational culture, developing educational programs, and creating a school climate conducive to student development. According to Hoy and Miskel (2013), school leadership is a key factor influencing school effectiveness through the creation of a positive school culture and climate. In line with this, Bush (2020) explains that the principal serves as an agent of change capable of directing all school resources toward achieving educational goals. In the context of character education, the principal functions not only as a school administrator but also as a role model, a driver of school culture, and a facilitator of students' character development. A conducive school environment also has a significant correlation with the social and moral character development of students (Thapa et al., 2022).

The transformational leadership of school principals has proven to be a catalyst in fostering a positive school climate through teacher empowerment and professional development (Hussain & Ali, 2023). Various studies have examined the relationship between school principal leadership, school culture, and character education. Research findings indicate that school principal leadership contributes to the formation of a positive school culture and supports students' character development (Hallinger, 2022; Leithwood, 2021). Other studies have found that the principal's exemplary behavior, effective communication, and the involvement of the entire school community are key factors in the successful implementation of character education (Sulastri et al., 2023; Wahyudi et al., 2024). Additionally, research on school climate indicates that a safe, comfortable, inclusive, and collaborative school environment can enhance students' social and moral development (Cohen, 2022; Wang & Degol, 2021). Research on parental involvement also indicates that collaboration between schools, families, and the community makes a positive contribution to children's character development (Epstein, 2021; Goodall, 2022).

Nevertheless, most previous studies have examined school principal leadership, character education, school culture, or parental involvement separately. Research explaining how principal leadership fosters a character-based school climate through the integration of various character programs, environmental culture, school community collaboration, and a sustainable monitoring system remains relatively limited, particularly in the context of elementary schools. In fact, effective character education requires a comprehensive approach that involves all school components in an integrated manner. Therefore, research is needed to elucidate the relationships among these components within a holistic leadership model.

SDN 201 Sukaluyu in Bandung is one of the elementary schools that demonstrates integrated character education practices through various school programs. Based on the results of observations, interviews, and document reviews, character education at this school is realized not only through religious practices but also through the Adiwiyata Program, the Environment-Based School Program, literacy initiatives, the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), and the Pancawaluya Task Force. These programs are supported by the principal's exemplary leadership, teacher participation, parent and school committee involvement, and a continuous monitoring system. These conditions indicate a leadership style that focuses not only on school management but also on fostering a school culture and climate that supports students' character development.

Previous research has generally addressed school principal leadership or character education separately. This study offers an integrative model that links visionary leadership, religion- and environment-based character programs, school community collaboration, and continuous monitoring in fostering a character-based school climate. The novelty of this study lies in the development of a principal leadership model that integrates a character vision, exemplary leadership, integrated character programs, school collaboration with parents and the school committee, and continuous monitoring as a unified system in building a character-based school climate.

Based on the above discussion, this study aims to describe and analyze the leadership model employed by elementary school principals in fostering a character-based school climate. The findings of this study are expected to contribute theoretically to the development of research on educational leadership and character education, as well as serve as a practical guide for school principals in developing a school climate that supports the character development of students.

Therefore, this study aims not only to describe school principals' leadership practices but also to develop an integrated model of school principal leadership that explains the relationship between character vision, exemplary leadership, character education programs, school community collaboration, and ongoing monitoring in fostering a character-based school climate.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach using the case study method. Field data collection was conducted from February to May 2026 at SDN 201 Sukaluyu in Bandung. The qualitative approach was chosen to understand and interpret social phenomena based on participants' perspectives within a natural setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the principal's leadership model in fostering a character-based school climate based on experiences, perspectives, and practices occurring within the school environment. The case study method was chosen because it allows for a comprehensive exploration of phenomena within a real-life context (Yin, 2018).

The study was conducted at SDN 201 Sukaluyu in Bandung, which was selected through purposive sampling because it offers various character education programs integrated into the school culture, such as religious activities, the Environment-Based School Program, Adiwiyata, the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), literacy programs, and the Pancawaluya Task Force. Additionally, the school has received the Adiwiyata award at the West Java provincial level, reflecting its commitment to character development and environmental stewardship.

The research participants were selected using purposive sampling, taking into account their involvement and experience in implementing character education at the school (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research informants consisted of one school principal (SP), five teachers (T1-T5), two parents of students (P1-P2), and one school committee member (CM1). These nine informants were selected because they possessed relevant knowledge regarding the principal's leadership practices and the implementation of character education at SDN 201 Sukaluyu in Bandung City.

The researcher's reflexivity was maintained throughout the study to enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings. As a teacher at SDN 201 Sukaluyu, the researcher served as both an insider researcher and an observer, thereby possessing a deep understanding of the school context. To minimize potential bias arising from this position, the researcher applied source triangulation and methodological triangulation through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Additionally, the researcher engaged in continuous reflection throughout the data collection and analysis process, ensuring that the resulting interpretations were grounded in empirical evidence gathered from the field, rather than on the researcher's assumptions or personal experiences.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. A single semi-structured interview was conducted with each informant, including one school principal, five teachers, two parents of students, and one school committee member. The interview with the school principal lasted approximately 60 minutes, while the interviews with teachers, parents, and the school committee member lasted approximately 30 minutes. The interviews focused on the

school principal's vision, leadership practices, the implementation of the character education program, collaboration with parents and the school committee, and its impact on the school climate.

Observations were conducted four times between February and May 2026, at a frequency of one observation per month. The observations focused on character-building activities, interactions among the school community, school culture, and students' behavior in their daily lives within the school environment.

Data analysis was conducted thematically, drawing on the interactive analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which includes data condensation, data presentation, and the drawing and verification of conclusions. During the data condensation phase, the researcher selected, focused, and organized data from interviews, observations, and documentation. Next, the data were presented in the form of matrices, tables, and narratives to identify patterns and relationships among categories. The final stage involved the continuous drawing and verification of conclusions until credible findings were obtained.

The analysis yielded five main themes that describe the principal's leadership model in fostering a character-based school climate, namely: (1) visionary leadership grounded in the values of discipline and independence, (2) the principal's role as a role model in driving school culture, (3) the integration of character education through religious programs, Adiwiyata, literacy, and Pancawaluya, (4) collaboration among the school, parents, and the committee in character building, and (5) the establishment of a character-based school climate that is religious, disciplined, independent, and environmentally conscious.

Data validity was ensured through source triangulation and methodological triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing data obtained from school principals, teachers, parents, and the school committee, while methodological triangulation was conducted by comparing data from interviews, observations, and documentation. In addition, the researcher conducted a re-examination of the data interpretation results to ensure the credibility and consistency of the research findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Table 1. Research Themes, Subthemes, and Data Sources

Research Themes	Subthemes	Data Sources
Visionary Leadership	Religious, disciplined, independent	SP, T1, T2, T3
Rooted in Character Values	Sharing the vision with the school community	SP, T
The Principal's Leadership by Example	Discipline and responsibility	SP, T1, T2, T3
	Open and collaborative communication	SP, T, CM

Character Development	Religious program	SP, T, Document
Programs and Habits	The 5S Culture	T, Observation
	Adiwiyata and Zero Waste	SP, T, P
	P5 and Character Development	SP, T
School Community Collaboration	Teacher collaboration	SP, T
	Parental involvement	P, SP
	The role of the school committee	C, SP
A School Culture of Character	Religious	T, P
	Discipline	T, CM
	Environmentally conscious	T, P
	Collaborative	All informants

Note :

SP = School Principal

T1-T5 = Teacher

CM = Committee Member

P = Parent

Result and Discussion

Finding

1. Visionary Leadership Rooted in the Values of Discipline and Independence

The research findings indicate that the principal has a clear vision for building students' character by reinforcing the values of discipline and independence. The principal views these two values as essential foundations that support students' academic and social development. According to the principal: "My vision for building students' character is to shape students who are strong-willed, religious, disciplined, independent, and responsible through exemplary leadership, a supportive school culture, and collaboration between the school, families, and the community." (SP)

Furthermore, the principal explained that discipline and independence are prioritized because these two values serve as the foundation for students to manage their time, fulfill their responsibilities, and make decisions appropriate to their developmental stage. These findings indicate that the character vision fostered by the school is not only focused on academic achievement but also on shaping students' behavior and attitudes.

This view is reinforced by teachers who believe that the principal practices democratic and collaborative leadership. One teacher stated: "The principal practices a democratic and collaborative leadership style, creating opportunities for discussion and listening to teachers' input before making important decisions." (T1)

Another teacher added: “The principal has a democratic leadership style, is open to criticism and suggestions, and involves teachers in making various decisions related to the school.” (T2)

The findings indicate that the vision of character fostered by the principal is not only communicated through formal policies but is also realized through a participatory leadership style, thereby gaining the support of the entire school community.

2. The Principal’s Leadership as a Driver of School Culture

The research findings indicate that leading by example is the primary strategy used by school principals to foster a character-based school culture. School principals strive to demonstrate discipline, responsibility, honesty, compassion, and collaboration in their daily activities. A school principal stated: “I strive to demonstrate discipline, responsibility, honesty, compassion, and collaboration. For example, by arriving on time and communicating openly with students, parents, and teachers.” (SP)

This statement is supported by the results of interviews with teachers and the school committee. One teacher stated: “The principal sets an example as a role model for the entire school community, including teachers, school staff, and students.” (T3). Another teacher added: “Examples of exemplary behavior that are often seen include carrying out duties with a sense of responsibility and greeting students when passing by.” (T4)

Meanwhile, the school committee views the principal as a persuasive figure who is responsive to various forms of feedback. “The most prominent characteristics are his persuasive nature, his role as a role model (setting a direct example), and his high responsiveness to feedback from the school community and committee members.” (CM) This finding indicates that the principal’s exemplary conduct is a key factor in fostering a positive school culture and reinforcing the internalization of character values among the entire school community.

The research findings indicate that the development of students’ character is supported by close collaboration between schools, parents, and school committees. Teachers explained that “parents are equal partners in aligning values” (G1), while parents stated that the school “involves parents quite well” (OT1). School committees also play a role in facilitating communication and supporting various character-building programs implemented by the school. These findings indicate that collaboration between schools, families, and school committees is a key factor in strengthening students’ character education.

The research findings indicate that the various character-building programs implemented by the school contribute to the creation of a school climate that is religious, disciplined, independent, and environmentally conscious. One parent stated

that SDN 201 Sukaluyu is “becoming safer, more comfortable, and continues to strive to improve every year” (OT1). The school committee also noted that the school culture has become more religious, disciplined, and family-oriented. These findings indicate that a character-based school climate has been established through the synergy between the principal’s leadership, character programs, and the involvement of the entire school community.

3. Integration of Character Education through Religious, Adiwiyata, Literacy, and Pancawaluya Programs

The research findings indicate that character education at SDN 201 Sukaluyu is implemented in an integrated manner through various school programs. These programs include religious activities, the 5S culture, Adiwiyata, the Environment-Based School Program, the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), and Character Development (Binter).

The principal explained that character education is not taught as a standalone program, but rather integrated into various school activities. Examples of these practices include the 5S culture, the 3R culture (reduce, reuse, recycle), classroom duty, the culture of waiting in line, bringing a reusable water bottle, maintaining a clean environment, as well as fostering empathy and the courage to speak up.

Teachers noted that some programs have a strong impact on students’ character development. One teacher stated: “The 5S culture program, integrated with welcoming students at the school gate every morning, is truly remarkable in fostering a sense of safety and comfort before classes begin.” (T1). Another teacher added: “The most impactful programs are the 5S culture and bringing a drink from home, as they help shape students’ character in their daily lives.” (T5)

In addition, environment-based character building is also evident through the practice of zero waste. “We are moving toward a zero-waste culture by encouraging children to bring water bottles and reusable cups every day.” (T3). These findings indicate that character education at SDN 201 Sukaluyu is developed through real-life experiences integrated into daily school life, making it easier for students to internalize.

Discussion

The research findings indicate that the principal’s leadership plays a central role in fostering a character-based school climate. A character vision that emphasizes the values of discipline and independence serves as the foundation for the various policies, programs, and school culture that are developed. The clarity of this vision enables the entire school community to share a common understanding of the character values to be realized. These findings align with the views of Hoy and Miskel (2013), who state that the principal plays a role in determining the direction of the school organization

through the vision, culture, and school climate that are established. In the context of this study, the character vision serves not only as a normative guideline but also as the basis for decision-making and the implementation of character education programs in the school.

This study also shows that the principal's exemplary behavior serves as a key mechanism in the process of internalizing character values. Exemplary behavior manifested through discipline, responsibility, openness, and concern for the environment provides a concrete example for both teachers and students. These findings support the character education theory proposed by Lickona (1991), which asserts that character formation requires role models capable of demonstrating moral values in daily actions. Thus, the principal not only serves as the administrator of the educational institution but also as a behavioral model that influences the organizational culture and the behavior of the school community.

Furthermore, this study indicates that the principal's leadership not only serves as a supporting factor for character education but also as the primary driving force that connects various school components into a single integrated system. These findings expand upon the results of Hallinger's (2022) research, which emphasizes the importance of school leadership in improving educational quality. In the context of SDN 201 Sukaluyu, the principal was able to integrate religious programs, environmental education through Adiwiyata, literacy, the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), and collaboration with various stakeholders as mutually supportive strategies in shaping students' character. Therefore, the principal serves not only as an educational manager but also as the architect of a character-driven school culture.

The research findings also indicate that character education is more effective when integrated into various school activities and culture than when implemented as a standalone program. Character values develop through real-life experiences gained by students in religious activities, environmental culture, literacy, P5, and various other habit-forming activities. These findings reinforce Dewey's (1916) view that character formation occurs through social experiences that students directly encounter in their daily lives. Additionally, the research findings of Setiawan and Cahyono (2024) indicate that the implementation of P5 will be more effective when supported by school leadership that possesses a clear and consistent vision of character.

The principal's exemplary behavior serves not only as a symbol of leadership but also as a mechanism for social learning among the school community. This finding can be explained through Social Learning Theory, which states that individuals tend to imitate the behavior of figures perceived as having authority and credibility. Therefore, the disciplined, responsible, and open behavior demonstrated by the principal serves as a behavioral reference for teachers and students. In other words,

character is not only taught through formal programs but is also transmitted through daily social interactions.

Another important finding of this study is the role of collaboration between schools, families, and school committees in strengthening the sustainability of character education. Unlike some previous studies that viewed parental involvement merely as a supporting factor, this study demonstrates that such collaboration serves as a reinforcing mechanism that maintains consistency in values between the school and family environments. Through intensive communication, parenting activities, and the school committee's involvement in various programs, the process of character internalization does not end at school but continues in students' lives at home and in the community. These findings enrich the theory of school-family-community partnership proposed by Epstein (2021) and reinforce the findings of Wulandari and Pratama (2025) that the success of character education in elementary schools is significantly influenced by the synergy built among the principal, teachers, parents, and the community.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of educational leadership research by demonstrating that the success of character education is determined not only by the individual leadership of the principal but also by the principal's ability to integrate a vision for character, exemplary behavior, character education programs, school community collaboration, and ongoing monitoring into a single, mutually supportive system. Thus, school principal leadership can be understood as the process of building a sustainable character education ecosystem within the elementary school environment.

The findings indicate that collaboration is a key factor because character education takes place across interconnected social environments. When the values taught at school are reinforced by parents at home, students receive consistent moral messages, making the process of internalizing values more effective. Conversely, a lack of alignment between school and family has the potential to reduce the effectiveness of character education. These findings suggest that the success of character education is determined not only by the quality of school programs but also by the degree of alignment in values among stakeholders.

Table 2. Key Findings of the Study

Themes	Key Quotes	Significance of the Findings
Visionary Leadership	"My vision for building students' character is to nurture students who are strong-willed, religious, disciplined, independent, and responsible." (SP)	The character vision serves as the foundation for the development of the school culture
Exemplary Behavior	"A common example of setting a good example is performing one's duties with a sense of responsibility and greeting students when passing by." (T4)	Leading by example as a strategy for shaping school culture
Character Development Program	"The 5S cultural awareness program, which is integrated with the daily morning greeting of students at the school gate, is truly remarkable." (T1)	Character is developed through daily habits
Collaboration	"The school does a good job of involving parents." (PS1)	School-family partnerships support character education
School Climate	"The school culture has become more religious, disciplined, and family-oriented." (C1)	A school environment that fosters character has been established

One of the main contributions of this study is the identification of a principal leadership model for fostering a character-based school climate that integrates a vision of character, exemplary leadership, integrated character programs, school community collaboration, and ongoing monitoring. This model demonstrates that the success of character education is not determined by a single program, but rather by the interconnectedness of various mutually supportive components within a cohesive system. In the context of SDN 201 Sukaluyu, the integration of religious, Adiwiyata, literacy, P5, and Pancawaluya programs has successfully fostered a school climate that is religious, disciplined, self-reliant, environmentally conscious, and collaborative. Therefore, the principal's leadership can be understood as a process of building a sustainable character education ecosystem through synergy between school culture, educational programs, and the involvement of all stakeholders.

Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa iklim sekolah berkarakter bukanlah hasil dari satu program tertentu, melainkan merupakan akumulasi dari visi yang jelas, keteladanan kepala sekolah, program yang terintegrasi, kolaborasi dengan keluarga, dan monitoring yang berkelanjutan. Dengan demikian, iklim sekolah berkarakter dapat dipahami sebagai hasil dari proses kepemimpinan yang berlangsung secara sistemik, bukan sekadar sebagai produk kebijakan atau kegiatan insidental.

Conceptually, the findings of this study can be summarized in a model of school principal leadership in fostering a character-based school climate, as presented in Figure 1.

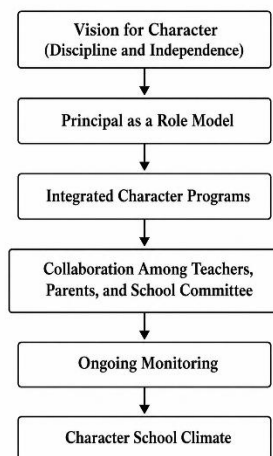


Figure 1. The Principal's Leadership Model in Fostering a Character-Based School Climate

This model represents the primary contribution of this study to the field of educational leadership and character education at the elementary school level.

Conclusion

This study shows that the principal's leadership plays a strategic role in fostering a character-based school climate in elementary schools. This leadership is manifested through a character vision focused on developing discipline and independence, the principal's exemplary conduct in daily school life, and the ability to integrate various school programs to support the strengthening of students' character. The principal's exemplary conduct has proven to be a key factor in fostering a positive school culture and encouraging the internalization of character values by the entire school community.

The research findings indicate that character education at SDN 201 Sukaluyu is implemented in an integrated manner through various school programs, including religious activities, the Adiwiyata Program, the Environment-Based School Program, literacy, the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), and the Pancawaluya Task Force. The successful implementation of these programs is supported by strong collaboration between the school, parents, and the school committee, as well as a continuous monitoring system. The integration of these various components contributes to the creation of a school climate that is religious, disciplined, independent, environmentally conscious, and collaborative.

This study produced a model of school principal leadership consisting of six main components: character vision, the principal's exemplary leadership, integrated character programs, collaboration between the school, parents, and the school committee, continuous monitoring, and a character-based school climate. This model demonstrates that the success of character education is not determined by a single program, but rather by the synergy of various school components managed in a visionary, collaborative, and sustainable manner. The findings of this study enrich the literature on educational leadership and character education and can serve as a reference for elementary schools in developing a school climate that supports the character development of students.

This study was conducted in a single elementary school context; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all elementary schools. Future studies may involve multiple schools with different characteristics to examine the applicability of the proposed leadership model in broader educational settings.

Practical Implications

School principals need to develop leadership focused on strengthening a school culture and environment rooted in character through setting a good example, developing a clear vision for character, and integrating character education programs into all school activities. In addition, schools need to build ongoing collaboration with parents and school committees so that the character-building process proceeds consistently across the school, family, and community environments. Character education programs also need to be designed in an integrated and sustainable manner so that character values are not merely taught but become a living culture in the daily life of the school.

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