

Principal Leadership in Strengthening Students' Qur'anic Worship Habits through the KAIH Program

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ABSTRACT

Cultivating religious character in elementary schools requires systematic leadership to transform national habituation programs into sustainable practices embedded within school culture and organizational routines. The Seven Habits of Great Indonesian Children (KAIH) movement was introduced to strengthen students' character development; however, the leadership mechanisms that support its implementation remain insufficiently explored. This study aims to examine how principal leadership strengthens the implementation of the KAIH program in improving students' Qur'anic worship habits at an Islamic elementary school. This research employed a qualitative case study design using semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentation. Participants consisted of one principal, two sixth-grade teachers, two Qur'anic tutors, four parents, and 54 sixth-grade students selected through purposive sampling. Data were analyzed using an interactive qualitative analysis model involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that the principal's leadership is enacted through three interconnected dimensions: managerial leadership that establishes systematic planning, monitoring, and organizational support; exemplary leadership that demonstrates religious values through direct participation in worship activities; and motivational leadership that sustains commitment through training, appreciation, and continuous guidance. These integrated leadership dimensions strengthen students' worship discipline, awareness, and consistency both at school and at home. Furthermore, this study proposes an integrated leadership mechanism model in which exemplary leadership functions as the foundational element reinforcing managerial and motivational practices to ensure the sustainability of religious habituation programs in Islamic elementary schools.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Elementary schools play a crucial role in shaping students' core values, particularly through the development of religious character and daily worship practices. In the Indonesian educational context, the dimensions of "Faith, Piety, and Noble Morals" are formally emphasized in the Graduate Competency Profile regulated in Permendikdasmen Number 10 of 2025. Religious practice in schools is therefore not limited to ritual activities but represents the internalization of values that guide students' attitudes, discipline, and moral behavior in everyday life. At the elementary level, repeated positive actions contribute significantly to the formation of long-term behavioral habits because children at this developmental stage are highly responsive to habituation processes [1]. Consequently, schools become strategic institutions for strengthening religious values through structured and continuous character-building programs [2].

One of the recent initiatives introduced by the Indonesian government is the Seven Habits of Great Indonesian Children (KAIH) program, launched by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in 2024. The program promotes seven daily habits, including worship, discipline, healthy living, social interaction, and enthusiasm for learning, as an effort to strengthen national character education [3]. Within Islamic education, worship practices are strongly associated with the internalization of Qur'anic values because worship in Islam encompasses both ritual devotion and broader moral conduct intended to strengthen one's relationship with Allah SWT. Previous studies indicate that consistent worship habits contribute to students' discipline, self-control, moral awareness, and time management [4]. Similar findings in international scholarship on faith-based schooling and character education also demonstrate that habituation programs, when supported by school culture and leadership, positively influence students' behavioral development and moral identity formation.

Despite these benefits, the implementation of habituation-based religious programs still faces substantial challenges. Studies have identified low stakeholder awareness, excessive technology exposure, limited facilities, and inconsistent family support as barriers to sustaining students' religious practices [5]. Effective implementation, therefore, requires not only curriculum integration and active learning strategies, but also strong leadership capable of coordinating school culture, teacher participation, and parental involvement [6]. In this context, the principal plays a strategic role in ensuring that religious habituation programs become embedded within institutional routines rather than functioning merely as symbolic activities. Leadership in faith-based schools extends beyond administrative management and includes the ability to model values, motivate school members, and cultivate a supportive spiritual environment [7].

Theoretically, this study integrates three interrelated perspectives: transformational leadership theory, habit formation theory, and school culture theory. Transformational leadership emphasizes the leader's role in inspiring, motivating, and influencing organizational members through vision, role modeling, and shared commitment [8]. Habit formation theory explains that repeated behaviors performed consistently within supportive environments gradually become automatic behavioral patterns [9]. Meanwhile, school

culture theory highlights the importance of shared norms, values, and routines in sustaining long-term educational practices [10]. The integration of these frameworks suggests that principal leadership influences students' religious practice through structured habituation processes embedded in school culture. In this conceptual relationship, leadership functions as the driving force, habituation acts as the operational mechanism, and students' religious practice discipline becomes the expected outcome.

Several previous studies have examined leadership and religious character education in schools. Mukarromah [11] found that principals significantly influence the implementation of character education through policy support and school management. Muhtadin et al. [12] emphasized the importance of spiritual leadership and role modeling in strengthening religious culture in Islamic schools. Research by Kamaluddin et al. [13] demonstrated that the KAIH program effectively supports student character development through structured habituation. Similarly, Arifin and Amelia (2024) reported that religious habituation programs improve students' worship discipline and behavioral consistency. However, these studies mainly focus either on general leadership practices or on habituation outcomes separately. Limited research specifically explains how principal leadership mechanisms systematically influence the implementation, sustainability, and effectiveness of KAIH in Islamic elementary schools.

In addition, previous studies have rarely examined the relationship between leadership roles, habituation systems, and students' religious practice discipline within a single conceptual framework. Existing research also tends to emphasize program implementation outcomes without exploring how managerial leadership, exemplary behavior, and motivational strategies interact in sustaining students' worship practices. Furthermore, qualitative case studies investigating leadership processes in Indonesian Islamic elementary schools remain limited. These gaps indicate the need for a more comprehensive investigation into how school leadership shapes the consistency of religious habituation programs.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze how principal leadership strengthens the implementation of the KAIH program in improving students' religious practice discipline at SDI Nurul Izzah Malang City. Specifically, this research examines the leadership mechanisms applied by the principal, the contribution of leadership to students' worship discipline, awareness, and consistency, as well as the supporting and inhibiting factors influencing program sustainability. The study also seeks to propose a conceptual leadership model explaining how managerial, exemplary, and motivational leadership dimensions interact in supporting religious habituation programs.

This research is expected to contribute theoretically and practically. Theoretically, the study enriches educational leadership literature by integrating transformational leadership, habit formation, and school culture theories within the context of Islamic elementary education. Practically, the findings are expected to provide guidance for principals, teachers, and policymakers in designing sustainable religious habituation programs capable of strengthening students' character development. In a broader context, this study may also offer insights for faith-based schools internationally regarding the

importance of leadership-driven habituation systems in fostering students' moral and religious development.

2. METHOD

Research Approach and Type

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore meanings, processes, and dynamics in a natural social context [14]. A single case study is applied to examine the principal's leadership in implementing the KAIH program at SDI Nurul Izzah Malang. Case study research investigates contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts, especially when boundaries are unclear. This approach focuses on "how" leadership ensures program consistency. The school was purposively selected as a unique and revelatory case with strong leadership and consistent KAIH implementation, enabling in-depth understanding and analytical transferability.

Research Location and Time

The study was conducted at SDI Nurul Izzah, Malang, East Java. The school was selected due to: (1) consistent KAIH implementation; (2) strong principal leadership in fostering religious culture; (3) structured worship programs (e.g., Tahsin, Tahfidz, Duha prayer, congregational Zuhur prayer, KAHFI); and (4) active support from teachers, students, and parents. The research lasted four months (January–April 2026), covering preparation, data collection, analysis, and reporting.

Research Subjects and Informants

Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on involvement, experience (minimum one year), and willingness to provide information. They include:

1. Principal (KS) – main decision maker exploring leadership strategies.
2. Two Grade 6 teachers (GK) – daily program implementers.
3. Two Qur'anic instructors (GQ) – responsible for Tahsin, Tahfidz, and evaluation.
4. Grade 6 students (54 total) – program recipients sharing experiences.
5. Four parents (WM) – providing insights on home worship practices.

This diversity ensures rich data and source triangulation.

Types and Sources of Data

1. Primary data: obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation, including transcripts, field notes, and internal documents (e.g., KAIH handbook, Qur'an report cards).
 2. Secondary data: supporting documents such as school profile, vision, mission, organizational structure, KAIH guidelines, schedules, reports, and relevant literature.
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Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using three main techniques:

1. Observation

Passive participatory observation was used to examine leadership practices, KAIH implementation, worship activities, interactions, and supporting/inhibiting factors [15].

2. In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals, teachers, Qur'anic instructors, and parents to explore experiences, meanings, and leadership processes. Each interview lasted 60–90 minutes, recorded and transcribed verbatim, with probing questions focusing on “how” leadership influences program consistency.

3. Documentation

Documentation included school records, KAIH guidelines, schedules, reports, meeting minutes, and activity photos. These were used to verify and enrich data and support triangulation.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

The Principal's Role and Leadership Process in Building Consistency in the KAIH Program

Research findings indicate that the principal of SDI Nurul Izzah carries out an integrated leadership role encompassing managerial, exemplary, and motivational functions. This aligns with the seven role framework of the principal proposed by Zadok et al. [16]: leader, manager, educator, administrator, supervisor, innovator, and motivator. However, these research findings expand on this framework by demonstrating that the three primary roles (managerial, exemplary, and motivational) do not operate in isolation but rather form a cascading influence mechanism, where exemplary behavior serves as the foundation that strengthens the effectiveness of the managerial and motivational roles.

a. The Managerial Role as a Foundation for Program Systematization

The findings regarding collaborative and measurable program planning (from the vision down to daily, weekly, monthly, and annual programs) reflect the effective implementation of management functions as proposed by Kamaluddin et al. [17]. The principal acts not only as a planner but also as an organizer, clearly dividing roles between the curriculum, student affairs, and Quran teams. This supports the concept of distributed leadership by Yogi [18], which emphasizes that effective leadership is shared among various formal and informal leaders within the organization.

The existence of an independent Quran curriculum separate from the national curriculum represents a strategic innovation. This aligns with the principal's role as an innovator, according to Fauziyah and Suyatno [19]. This curriculum independence allows schools the flexibility to adapt religious achievement targets (Tahsin, Tahfidz, prayer practice) to student characteristics, without being tied to national minimum standards that may be less ambitious.

b. The Role of Role Modeling as Primary Social Capital

The most significant finding of this study is that the principal's exemplary behavior is the most dominant supporting factor. The principal not only provides instructions but also directly participates in the Dhuha prayer, Morning Prayer, and other religious activities. This aligns with the findings of Arimbi and M. Minsih [20], who confirmed that direct spiritual role modeling from leaders is a key determinant in fostering a religious culture. From a theoretical perspective, this role modeling builds what Achadah et al. [21] call credibility and trust, which are key social capital for influencing the school community. Teachers who see their principal participating in congregational prayer will be motivated to do the same, and students who see their teacher worship will imitate them without coercion.

This finding is also relevant to the concept of transformational leadership outlined by Abdunnasir and Amirudin [22], in which leaders serve as role models who inspire their followers through concrete actions, not just words. The principal's transformational leadership style, as acknowledged by Mrs. Izzah herself, has proven effective in driving the KAIH program.

c. Motivational Role and Structured Monitoring System

Findings regarding the principal's support in the form of training, workshops, and visits to teachers' homes indicate that motivation is not only provided verbally, but also through concrete capacity-building actions. This aligns with the findings of Abidin et al. [23] that the principal's ability to consistently motivate directly impacts the level of participation and discipline of the school community.

The monitoring system, which utilizes the KAIH pocket book, the SKU book, and a special Quran report card, is a good practice that integrates the roles of administrators and supervisors. According to Wiharti and Hanif [24], the principal's administrative role in preparing recording and documentation instruments is crucial to the smooth operation of the program. SDI Nurul Izzah has demonstrated that a sound administrative system (connection book, special report card, WhatsApp group) allows for consistent monitoring of students' religious practices both at school and at home.

Leadership's Contribution to Student Worship Obedience (Discipline, Awareness, Consistency)

Research findings indicate that the KAIH program, effectively led by the principal, contributed to an increase in all three indicators of student worship obedience. This reinforces the theory of character formation through habit formation proposed by Pratiwi and Mawardi [25].

d. Discipline: From Instruction to Habit

The increase in student worship discipline, as reported by teachers and parents, reflects the program's success in building habit strength. Children who initially needed repeated reminders gradually became accustomed to performing prayers on time. Class teachers acknowledged that the key to success was the teacher's consistency in reminding, not rigid firmness.

These findings align with research by Putri et al. [26], which showed that a structured religious habit formation program had a significant impact on improving student worship discipline. However, this study complements these findings by demonstrating that the principal's role as the primary driver (not just the teacher) is a key variable that strengthens the program's impact.

Observations of congregational Zuhur prayers, which showed students' ability to line up neatly without repeated instruction, indicate that discipline has become an automatic habit. This is an indicator of the success of a habit-building program based on the principle of automaticity in habit formation theory [27].

e. Awareness: From Routine to Meaning

Findings regarding students' awareness of worship, reflected in their ability to understand the meaning of worship (being grateful for food, linking science lessons to God's greatness), indicate that the KAIH program at SDI Nurul Izzah does not simply create empty routines but fosters spiritual understanding.

This aligns with the concept of worship from an Islamic perspective, which is not limited to formal rituals but encompasses every positive action undertaken with the intention of drawing closer to Allah SWT [28]. Teachers who integrate the value of worship into science lessons and communal mealtimes have implemented holistic character education that goes beyond traditional instructional approaches.

The finding that students independently recite prayers before and after meals without prompting indicates that awareness has transformed from external regulation to integrated regulation within the framework of Self Determination Theory [29]. Students no longer pray out of fear of being reprimanded by teachers, but because they understand the value and meaning of such worship.

f. Consistency: From School to Home

The most encouraging finding was parents' reports that their children continued to attend the mosque at home diligently and had a sense of self-awareness to return home immediately when prayer time arrived. This indicates that consistent worship has transcended the school environment and become internalized as part of the students' lifestyle.

However, this study also found that consistency remains a challenge, particularly in muroja'ah (reciting memorization) and mutola'ah (reading the Quran) at home. Quran teachers acknowledged that parents tended to focus more on reminding them of general subject homework than on religious lessons.

From the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, the consistency of children's religious practices is influenced by the interaction between systems: the school microsystem (teachers, friends) and the home microsystem (parents) [30]. When both systems have aligned values and practices, consistency is maintained. Conversely, when dissonance occurs (parents focus more on general subjects), children's consistency can decline. SDI Nurul Izzah has addressed this challenge through a liaison book and regular

communication with parents, but there is still a need to strengthen parents' awareness of the importance of religious practices.

3.2. Discussion

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors and Their Hierarchy

This study not only identifies supporting and inhibiting factors but also structures their hierarchy based on the intensity of influence. This is novel, as previous research tended to list factors straightforwardly without analyzing the hierarchical relationships between them.

a. Hierarchy of Supporting Factors

First, the exemplary behavior of the principal and teachers is the most dominant factor because it serves as the *primum mobil* (primary driver) that influences all other factors. Without exemplary behavior, even a sophisticated monitoring system will be ineffective because there is no role model for behavior. This aligns with transformational leadership theory [31], which places idealized influence as the first and most important dimension. Second, a structured monitoring system is an essential supporting factor because it functions as a feedback loop that maintains consistency. SKU books, special report cards, and WhatsApp groups create accountability and transparency. Without a monitoring system, exemplary behavior alone is insufficient because there is no mechanism to detect deviations and provide corrections.

Third, an independent Quranic curriculum provides a structural advantage because schools are not limited by national minimum standards. This allows for higher targets (memorization of Juz 30 by graduation) and more intensive methods (teachers certified to memorize 30 Juz).

Fourth, team collaboration ensures synergy between areas (curriculum, student affairs, Quran team). This prevents overlapping or gaps in responsibilities.

Fifth, partnerships with parents are a supporting factor that extends the program's reach from school to home. Without parental support, consistent worship at home is difficult to achieve.

The relationship between supporting factors is complementary and cumulative: the more supporting factors that are met, the greater the program's effectiveness. However, role models remain the most fundamental foundation.

b. Hierarchy of Inhibiting Factors

First, fluctuating student discipline is the most dominant internal barrier because it is dynamic and depends on the student's daily psychological state. No two days are the same in terms of student enthusiasm and motivation. This confirms the findings of Abdunnasir and Amirudin [22] that cultivating a habit of worship requires patience and consistency because children have changing moods.

Second, diverse home environments are the most dominant external barrier. As teachers expressed, schools cannot control what happens at home. Some parents are very

supportive, while others focus more on academics. This creates a gap between school expectations and the reality on the ground.

Third, the competency of non-religious teachers is a barrier related to human resources. The Quran teacher suggested that all teachers (including those teaching general subjects) be equipped with the ability to accompany worship. This demonstrates that ideally every teacher should be a character educator, not just a subject teacher.

Fourth, the limited standard guidelines from the government are a systemic barrier beyond the control of schools. The Quran teacher acknowledged the need for clear national standards for the proper and correct implementation of worship, including adjustments to the background of religious organizations (NU, Muhammadiyah). This suggests that even though schools have their own curriculum, they still need a broader policy umbrella.

c. Interrelationships Between Factors and Their Implications for Program Success

Research findings indicate a dialectical relationship between supporting and inhibiting factors. The most dominant supporting factor (role modelling) directly addresses the most dominant inhibiting factor (student discipline). The stronger the role model set by the principal and teachers, the more quickly students are motivated to be disciplined.

Similarly, a structured monitoring system addresses the challenges of diverse home environments. With the presence of contact books and WhatsApp groups, parents who initially paid little attention to their children's religious practices become more aware because they have written reports to fill out.

However, systemic inhibiting factors (limited standard guidelines) cannot be completely addressed by schools. This requires intervention from higher policy levels (Ministry of Religious Affairs, Education Office). Schools can only adapt and innovate at the micro level, but they still need a supportive regulatory framework.

Theoretical Novelty of Research Findings

This research yields several theoretical novelties:

Three Mechanism Model of Leadership Influence: This research demonstrates that effective principal leadership in the context of habituating religious observances is not sufficient by simply carrying out seven roles [32], but rather by implementing three main roles (managerial, exemplary, and motivational) in an integrated manner, with exemplary behavior as the foundation.

Hierarchy of Supporting and Inhibiting Factors: This research goes beyond the simple identification of factors by constructing a hierarchy based on the intensity of influence and causal relationships between factors. This provides a more nuanced understanding of which factors need to be prioritized.

The Concept of Consistency Across Settings: This research reinforces the importance of consistent religious observances not only at school but also at home, and identifies factors that facilitate or hinder the transfer of habits from one setting to another. This is relevant to the ecological theory of child development.

Integration of KAIH with the Independent Quranic Curriculum: This study shows that the successful implementation of the national program (KAIH) is largely determined by the school's ability to integrate it with existing flagship programs. SDI Nurul Izzah did not adopt KAIH rigidly, but instead utilized it as a reinforcement of existing programs (Tahsin, Tahfidz, and Morning pearl). This aligns with the findings of Kurniawan and Fitriani (2023) that the principal's innovative capacity is a crucial factor in adapting the national program to suit local needs.

Practical Implications of Research Findings

Based on the discussion above, this study has several practical implications:

For Principals: Modeling is not merely an added value, but a necessary foundation. Principals who wish to promote a program to foster worship habits must be willing to be directly involved, not simply give orders from behind a desk.

For Teachers: All teachers, not just religious teachers, need to be equipped with the competencies to assist in worship. Training and workshops provided by principals should include the entire teaching staff. **For Parents:** Schools need to continue strengthening partnerships with parents through transparent monitoring systems and regular communication. Contact books and WhatsApp groups should not be merely administrative tools, but rather platforms for building shared awareness.

For Policymakers: National standard guidelines are needed for the implementation of religious services in schools that take into account the diversity of religious organizations (NU, Muhammadiyah, etc.). These standards will help schools design appropriate programs without worrying about overstepping boundaries.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the successful implementation of the Seven Habits of Great Indonesian Children (KAIH) program at SDI Nurul Izzah is strongly influenced by integrated principal leadership that combines managerial, exemplary, and motivational dimensions. These leadership dimensions function synergistically to strengthen students' religious practice discipline, awareness, and consistency through structured habituation processes embedded within school culture. Among these dimensions, exemplary leadership emerged as the central mechanism that reinforces the effectiveness of managerial planning and motivational support. The findings also reveal that structured monitoring systems, collaborative teamwork, and parental involvement contribute significantly to sustaining students' religious practices both at school and at home. Conversely, fluctuating student motivation, diverse family environments, limited teacher competence in religious guidance, and the absence of standardized policy guidelines remain important challenges affecting program consistency.

The study contributes theoretically by integrating transformational leadership theory, habit formation theory, and school culture theory into a leadership framework for religious habituation in Islamic elementary schools. The proposed integrated leadership mechanism model provides a conceptual explanation of how leadership practices influence the sustainability of character-based religious programs. Practically, the findings offer important

implications for school leaders, teacher education institutions, and policymakers. School principals are encouraged to prioritize exemplary leadership alongside administrative management, while teacher training institutions should strengthen educators' competencies in character-based religious mentoring. Policymakers may also consider developing clearer operational guidelines for implementing religious habituation programs in schools while accommodating diverse Islamic educational traditions.

This study has several limitations. First, the research was conducted in a single Islamic elementary school, which limits the generalizability of the findings to broader educational contexts. Second, the qualitative case study design relies heavily on participant perspectives and researcher interpretation, which may involve subjective bias. Third, the study focused specifically on sixth-grade students within one regional setting, thereby limiting the scope of developmental and contextual variation examined. In addition, the research primarily explored leadership processes and did not quantitatively measure long-term behavioral outcomes of students' religious practices.

Future research is recommended to expand the investigation through comparative studies involving multiple schools with different organizational cultures and educational backgrounds. Longitudinal studies are also needed to examine the sustainability of students' religious habituation over time and across educational levels. Furthermore, quantitative or mixed methods approaches may be conducted to validate the proposed leadership mechanism model and examine the causal relationship between leadership dimensions and students' religious practice discipline. Broader international studies on faith-based leadership and habituation programs may also enrich understanding of how religious character education can be adapted across different educational systems and cultural contexts. Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader educational community by highlighting the importance of leadership-driven habituation systems in strengthening students' moral development, religious character, and sustainable school culture.

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