

The Role of Madrasah Principal Leadership in Developing Students' Social Character at MTsN 4 Mandailing Natal

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of the madrasah principal's leadership in shaping students' social character at MTsN 4 Mandailing Natal. The research addresses the problem of how leadership practices influence the development of core social values in students, aiming to explore the strategies and impacts of principal-led character education. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, direct observations, and analysis of school documents. The findings highlight the principal's role as a role model, policy maker, and facilitator in embedding Islamic values across educational practices. Key social character traits, politeness, responsibility, discipline, compassion, and cooperation—are nurtured through religious activities, student empowerment, and collective engagement within a spiritually enriched school culture. This research contributes to understanding leadership-based character education and offers practical implications for educational leaders in Islamic contexts.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Indonesia has faced growing concerns about the erosion of students' character, particularly in the social domain. Reports from educational authorities and national surveys reveal worrying trends among school-age children, including increasing incidents of intolerance, dishonesty, selfishness, and a lack of empathy [1], [2], [3]. These challenges are especially prominent during adolescence, when students are highly susceptible to external influences, including peer pressure, social media, and a rapidly evolving global culture. In response, the national education agenda has increasingly emphasised the importance of character education, particularly within Islamic-based educational institutions such as *madrasah* [4], [5], [6].

Social character, a key aspect of character education, plays a vital role in shaping students to become individuals who can interact respectfully, work collaboratively, and demonstrate values such as integrity, compassion, and social responsibility. In the context of madrasahs, this emphasis aligns with the broader mission of Islamic education, which seeks not only to develop intellectual capacities but also to nurture spiritually and morally upright individuals who embody *akhlaqul karimah* (noble character) [7], [8], [9].

However, the effectiveness of social character development in madrasahs depends significantly on leadership. The madrasah principal is not merely responsible for academic outcomes or administrative efficiency but is also expected to be a moral leader, a visionary planner, and a cultural architect within the school. Their leadership style and commitment to Islamic values directly influence the success of character education programs and the overall school climate [10], [11].

The principal holds a uniquely strategic role within the framework of Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs). In addition to overseeing educational administration, they are entrusted with guiding the moral, social, and spiritual development of students and staff. Their leadership is pivotal in promoting noble values, fostering a positive school environment, and encouraging all stakeholders to collectively pursue the goals of national education and the Islamic mission of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (a mercy to all creation). As social challenges increase, so does the complexity of the madrasah principal's role. They are expected to serve as transformational leaders, role models, motivators, and ethical decision-makers [12], [13], [14].

This leadership role is especially critical at MTsN 4 Mandailing Natal, where the principal is tasked with balancing academic excellence and cultivating students' social and spiritual values. The institution operates within a unique socio-cultural context, where community norms, adolescent challenges, and digital influences converge. In this setting, the principal must actively design and implement strategies that reinforce social character both in and outside the classroom. Initiatives such as daily religious gatherings (*pengajian*), student council (*OSIM*) involvement, community service, scouting activities, and etiquette campaigns (such as greeting, smiling, and politeness) reflect the school's commitment to nurturing socially responsible students [15], [16].

Supporting this, Regulation No. 58 of 2017 issued by the Ministry of Religious Affairs underscores the expanded role of madrasah principals as school managers and agents of change who must ensure the quality of holistic education, including social, emotional, and spiritual development. Consequently, the principal at MTsN 4 is expected to act as a visionary leader who unites teachers, parents, and the broader community in fostering a value-driven educational environment [17], [18], [19].

Existing studies lend theoretical support to the importance of leadership in character education. For instance, Kamal et al. [20] found that transformational leadership significantly influences students' empathy, cooperation, and responsibility by fostering a school culture rooted in Islamic ethics. Similarly, Abdul Mutalib et al. [21] emphasised that in the Islamic tradition, a leader functions as *khadim al-ummah* (servant of the people), where integrity, sincerity, and service to others are at the heart of effective leadership.

However, these studies often remain abstract, lacking concrete examples of how leadership is translated into practical programs and actions in specific school contexts [22], [23].

Despite a growing body of research on Islamic leadership and character education, there remains a gap in understanding how madrasah principals implement and integrate social character development in real educational settings. Many previous works focus on general leadership theory or student outcomes without examining the daily practices, strategic decisions, and leadership culture shaped by principals. This gap is particularly noticeable in MTs-level education, where character formation during adolescence is critical.

This study offers a novel contribution by examining the specific case of MTsN 4 Mandailing Natal, exploring how its principal engages in character-building through managerial, pedagogical, and exemplary leadership. The investigation focuses on leadership practices, school culture, and stakeholder engagement as key drivers of social character development.

This research aims to explore the role of the principal of MTsN 4 Mandailing Natal in developing students' social character, emphasising the principal's leadership strategies, values-based programming, and daily actions that influence the school community. The study also seeks to identify the challenges and enablers of character education within the madrasah context.

2. METHOD

This study was conducted at Madrasah Tsanawiyah Negeri (MTsN) 4 Mandailing Natal, located in Mandailing Natal Regency, North Sumatra Province. The school was selected as the research setting due to its strong emphasis on character development based on Islamic values and the active leadership of its principal, who is widely recognised for promoting social character education both within and beyond the classroom. The principal's role extends beyond administrative management and encompasses moral leadership, vision-building, and fostering a school environment that emphasises empathy, discipline, cooperation, and Islamic ethics. These features make MTsN 4 a relevant and valuable context for studying the impact of school leadership on students' social character [24], [25].

The research was carried out over eight months, from January to August 2025. This timeframe allowed the researcher to engage in multiple stages of the research process, including proposal writing, securing research permits, conducting fieldwork, analysing data, and preparing the final research report. A longer research period was deliberately chosen to enable deeper observation of school life and provide a holistic understanding of leadership practices across various school activities and periods.

The research utilised a qualitative method with a descriptive approach, which was deemed appropriate for exploring the lived experiences, values, and leadership strategies associated with character development. Rather than focusing on numerical measurements, the study sought to capture the meaning behind educational practices and interpersonal interactions that influence students' social behaviour. The qualitative method also allowed

for flexibility in adjusting to the dynamic nature of the school setting. The researcher served as the main data collection and interpretation instrument in this approach.

Data Sources

Data for this study were gathered from primary and secondary sources.

- Primary data were obtained through interviews and observations involving 40 participants. These participants included one madrasah principal, 15 teachers, 15 students from different grade levels, and nine parents actively involved in school activities. This diverse participant pool enabled a broad yet detailed view of the principal's leadership and its effects on students' social character from multiple stakeholder perspectives. In addition, various school events and everyday interactions were observed directly to provide contextual depth to the findings.
- Secondary data were collected from official school documents, such as the school's vision and mission statements, annual work plans, character education programs, curriculum plans, student council activity records, and student evaluation reports. These documents offered valuable insight into how the school formally integrates character education into its institutional framework.

Sampling Technique

The study employed a purposive sampling technique, selecting participants based on their relevance and knowledge concerning the research focus. The goal was to include individuals who were directly engaged with the school's character education practices or could provide informed perspectives on the principal's leadership. To broaden the scope and gather deeper insights, a snowball sampling approach was also used, whereby initial participants recommended other relevant individuals, such as specific teachers or active parents who could enrich the data with their experiences. This approach ensured the participant group was varied and substantively connected to the research topic.

Data Collection Techniques

Four main techniques were employed for data collection:

1. In-depth interviews were conducted using semi-structured guides to allow participants the freedom to express their views while maintaining consistency across key themes. Interviews were held with the principal, teachers, students, and parents to capture a multi-perspective understanding of character education. These interviews provided rich qualitative data regarding daily leadership practices, stakeholder perceptions, and real-life examples of character-building activities.
 2. Participant observation allowed the researcher to be immersed in the school environment, observing how the principal interacted with teachers, students, and parents in various settings. Attention was given to how honesty, cooperation, and empathy were reinforced during lessons, school ceremonies, religious activities, and extracurricular programs.
 3. Grand tour and mini tour observations were conducted to systematically observe the school and focus on specific events or interactions. The grand tour provided an overall
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view of the school climate, while mini tours focused on scouting, student council meetings, and group religious reflections. These techniques helped the researcher capture broad patterns and specific instances of social character development.

4. Document analysis included the review of school policies, character education planning documents, curriculum designs, records of student participation in extracurricular activities, and assessment tools used to measure character development. These documents were used to cross-check and validate the data obtained from interviews and observations.

Data Analysis Technique

The collected data were analysed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman [26], which consists of three interrelated steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification.

- Raw data from interviews, observations, and documents were sorted, condensed, and categorised during data reduction. Relevant excerpts were selected based on their relation to the research focus, while repetitive or irrelevant information was excluded. Data were grouped into meaningful units: leadership actions, stakeholder roles, school culture, and character-building outcomes.
- The coding process followed open, axial, and selective coding. In the open coding phase, significant statements and behaviours were identified. Axial coding was then used to relate these categories to broader themes (e.g., modelling behaviour, strategic planning, collaboration). Finally, selective coding helped develop core narratives that describe how the principal's leadership directly and indirectly influenced students' social character.
- The data display stage involved organising the coded data into thematic narratives and visual formats (such as tables or diagrams), which helped the researcher see relationships and patterns across different data sets. These displays facilitated analysis by allowing the researcher to trace how leadership activities were implemented and how they impacted student behaviour.
- Conclusion drawing and verification were performed iteratively. Initial conclusions were constantly re-evaluated using triangulation techniques—comparing data across sources (interviews, observations, documents) and confirming key insights with multiple informants. This process ensured that the findings accurately represented the lived reality of the school environment.

Ethical Considerations

The research adhered to strict ethical standards throughout its implementation. Before data collection, participants were provided with clear information about the research purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the option to withdraw at any time without consequences. Informed consent was obtained in writing from all participants, with parental approval sought for student interviews. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained; the report did not use names and identifying details. The researcher also respected school norms and maintained professional conduct during all observations and interactions, ensuring the integrity and trustworthiness of the research process.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The State of Students' Social Character at MTsN 4 Mandailing Natal

Character development is a core and inseparable part of the educational process at MTsN 4 Mandailing Natal. This madrasah prioritises academic achievement and strongly emphasises character education as a foundation for nurturing knowledgeable and morally upright individuals. This aligns with the goals of national education as outlined in Article 3 of Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, which aims to develop students into individuals who are faithful, pious, noble in character, healthy, knowledgeable, skilled, and responsible.

At MTsN 4 Mandailing Natal, character formation is carried out holistically, integrating formal classroom learning, exemplary behaviour from teachers, habitual reinforcement of positive values in daily life, and active student involvement in curricular and extracurricular activities. In-depth interviews with the principal and several teachers reveal that students' social character is not formed instantly; rather, it results from a continuous process of value internalisation, guided by an educational approach that emphasises care and compassion. This aligns with Lickona's [27] view that character education is a conscious effort to help students understand, appreciate, and practice moral values in daily life.

One of the most prominent character traits observed among the students is politeness. The principal emphasised that courteous behaviour is continuously reinforced in and outside the classroom. In daily interactions, students are accustomed to greeting teachers respectfully, kissing their hands as a sign of reverence, and speaking in a polite and measured tone. One teacher noted that this culture of respect has become a defining identity of the students at the school. The researcher's observation also confirmed that most students spontaneously display polite behaviours such as offering greetings, asking for permission respectfully, and assisting teachers without being asked.

This respectful attitude is extended to all school community members—not only to teachers but also to administrative staff, cleaning personnel, and security guards. Such a culture of respect reflects Islamic values that are consistently taught, in line with the hadith of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH):

"He is not one of us who does not show respect to elders and compassion to the young" (HR. Tirmidhi).

This principle of adab (ethics and decorum) serves as the moral foundation of students' social interactions. In addition to politeness, responsibility emerged as another key trait. The principal explained that students' sense of responsibility is cultivated through academic assignments and involvement in organisational roles such as OSIM (student council), scouting, Rohis (Islamic spiritual organisation), and other religious programs. Students actively plan and organise events, including Islamic holiday commemorations, inter-class competitions, and charity drives. This practice echoes Lickona's [28] assertion that effective character education fosters an environment where students take responsibility for themselves and their community.

Subject teachers also noted that students demonstrate responsible behaviour by consistently completing assignments on time, maintaining classroom cleanliness, and

adhering to duty rosters. Some students even voluntarily take on additional responsibilities, such as tutoring peers or assisting teachers with lesson preparations, indicating that responsibility has become an internalised value rather than a mere obligation.

Social awareness and empathy are also strongly evident. In social programs such as *Jumat Berkah* (Friday Blessings), disaster relief fundraising, and religious community service, students enthusiastically participate and often initiate ideas for charitable activities. According to one teacher, students rarely miss out on these events and actively contribute suggestions. This reflects the spirit of *Surah Al-Ma'un* (Qur'an 107:1–7), which stresses the importance of social care as an integral part of faith and Islamic practice.

A religious, disciplined, and family-like school climate further strengthens character education at MTsN 4. The principal highlighted that religious activities—such as congregational prayers, morning Qur'an recitations, and group *dhikr* every Friday—serve as vital media for developing spiritual and social character. The guidance counsellor added that the school's familial approach fosters close and open relationships between students and teachers, making character formation a natural part of everyday life rather than a burden.

Regarding role modelling, all teachers and staff strive to be examples of morality, discipline, and cooperation. This is consistent with the educational philosophy of Ki Hadjar Dewantara:

"Ing ngarsa sung tuladha, ing madya mangun karsa, tut wuri handayani"—which translates to: *"In front, set an example; in the middle, build motivation; at the back, provide support."* This principle is reflected in all aspects of school life, from classroom teaching and student activities to daily social interactions.

In conclusion, based on interviews, observations, and document analysis, the success of character development at MTsN 4 Mandailing Natal is not merely the result of formal curriculum implementation. It is largely driven by the commitment of school leadership, exemplary behaviour of teachers, a religious and humanistic school culture, and students' active engagement in meaningful activities. This integrative approach ensures that character education is not a superficial concept, but a living, continuous process embedded in students' everyday experiences.

Forms of Student Character at MTsN 4 Mandailing Natal

Culturing student character is a fundamental and inseparable aspect of the educational process at MTsN 4 Mandailing Natal. This madrasah integrates academic learning with moral and social values, embedding character education as a central component in shaping students who are not only intellectually capable but also spiritually and socially mature. Thomas Lickona [27] emphasised that character education is a deliberate effort to help individuals understand, internalise, and act upon ethical values. At MTsN 4, these values are theoretical and practised through example, habitual reinforcement, and a supportive school environment.

Based on interviews with the principal, teachers, and findings from observations and student activity documentation, several key social character traits have emerged among MTsN 4 Mandailing Natal students.

One of the most prominent traits is politeness. The principal noted that respectful behaviour forms the foundation of students' social interactions at the school. In Islamic teachings, politeness is a key element of *akhlaq al-karimah* (noble character), which is highly regarded [29]. In daily routines, students are encouraged to greet and kiss the hands of teachers as they arrive and leave the school. They are also taught to treat every individual in the school community, including administrative staff, janitors, and fellow students, equally respected.

The researcher observed that a culture of respect has been deeply embedded in students' daily behaviour. Students greet with Islamic salutations and show respectful body language, such as bowing their heads when passing teachers, listening attentively during lessons, and avoiding inappropriate or harsh language. These behaviours reflect the school's success in instilling values of courtesy and decorum through consistent modelling and habitual practice. According to Ratna Megawangi [30], when reinforced by consistent role models, positive routines in the school environment are highly effective in developing students' character.

Another noteworthy trait is responsibility. The principal explained that students are responsible for their academic tasks and various social roles, including leadership in student organisations like OSIM, religious programs, and event committees. This sense of responsibility is cultivated by involving students actively in school programs and trusting them with leadership roles. Observations revealed that OSIM members could carry out organised duties, such as planning events for the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, National Santri Day, and social service initiatives.

Moreover, students demonstrated independence in completing individual and group assignments and showed a strong awareness of school rules and regulations. As stated by Muslich [31], responsibility is a key indicator of character development and must be nurtured through meaningful roles and direct experiences. In this regard, MTsN 4 Mandailing Natal successfully empowers students as active participants in their character development.

Discipline is another essential character trait emphasised at the school. Students are accustomed to arriving on time, participating in morning assemblies, and adhering to class schedules and school rules. Mardiyah et al. [32] suggest that discipline is a core pillar of character education, as it fosters self-control and responsible behaviour. At MTsN 4, discipline is further reinforced through a consistent reward and punishment system.

Additional social values instilled in students include empathy and cooperation. Students demonstrate a strong sense of solidarity and compassion during religious activities such as congregational prayers, Qur'an recitation, and community service efforts, like fundraising for disaster victims and visits to orphanages. One Islamic Education teacher mentioned that social values such as mutual help and support are ingrained through daily routines. This aligns with the message of Surah Al-Ma'idah (5:2), which calls on Muslims to support one another in righteousness and piety.

The success of social character formation at MTsN 4 Mandailing Natal is not solely the result of formal curricular implementation. It is also shaped by the visionary leadership of the principal, a conducive school culture, and the active involvement of the entire school

community. The principal fosters a religious, disciplined, and familial environment that encourages students to grow in a setting that upholds noble values. Suyanto [33] noted that effective character education should incorporate three core components: *knowing the good*, *feeling the good*, and *doing the good*, all holistically implemented at this madrasah.

In conclusion, MTsN 4 Mandailing Natal is a model of best practices in nurturing students' social character at the madrasah level. Through a comprehensive and participatory approach, the school demonstrates that successful character education is built upon consistent modelling, routine practice, and a supportive environment.

The Role of Madrasah Leadership in Fostering Students' Social Character

At MTsN 4 Mandailing Natal, student character development is a strategic priority within the educational process. The school believes that successful education is not solely measured by academic excellence but also by cultivating well-rounded individuals with noble character and strong social skills. This commitment is evident in the principal's policies, classroom practices, and the overall school culture that permeates daily life.

The principal emphasises that the core social values fostered within the school environment include politeness, responsibility, cooperation, discipline, and compassion for others. These values are continuously instilled through role modelling, habitual practices, and students' active involvement in various school activities. This aligns with Lickona's [27] holistic approach to character education, which incorporates moral cognition, emotion, and behaviour.

One of the most dominant and distinguishing traits among students at MTsN 4 is politeness. Interviews revealed that students regularly greet their teachers, kiss their hands, and show respect toward all members of the school community, including administrative staff, janitors, and visitors. Subject teachers noted that these behaviours result from consistent daily routines, reinforced by the exemplary conduct of the teaching staff. As Afdaliah [34] suggests, character education through role modelling has a powerful impact on shaping student behaviour, as children learn best from what they observe and experience firsthand.

Field observations confirmed this, with students seen each morning welcoming their teachers with smiles, greetings, and respectful gestures such as hand-kissing. These actions are not forced but performed voluntarily and sincerely. This supports Zakiyah's [35] view that students more easily internalise character values introduced through pleasant experiences and positive role modelling.

In addition to politeness, responsibility is another prominent trait. According to the principal, students demonstrate responsibility in academic tasks and extracurricular roles, such as being members of the OSIM student council, event committees, and school competitions. They are also entrusted with managing religious activities such as morning Qur'an recitations (*tadarus*), *duha* sermons, and weekly clean-up programs. These opportunities allow students to develop leadership skills, time management, and the ability to make fair and wise decisions. This reflects Lickona's [28] assertion that meaningful student engagement and real-life experiences are essential in fostering responsibility and leadership.

Social empathy is also an integral aspect of character development at MTsN 4. Interviews with Civics (PPKn) teachers revealed that students actively participate in social outreach programs such as fundraising for ill classmates, distributing food to residents, and visiting orphanages. These activities are well-organised and are part of a larger initiative called the *Madrasah Care Movement (Gerakan Madrasah Peduli)*. Such efforts align with the concept of *Service Learning* proposed by Bringle and Hatcher [36], where students learn through meaningful engagement in real-world community service.

A religious culture also plays a central role in shaping students' moral and social values. The school consistently holds religious activities, including congregational prayers, Qur'an recitation, and other spiritual programs that instill ethical and spiritual values. As Tilaar [37] notes, a religious educational environment fosters a heightened sense of moral awareness in students, which is crucial for forming harmonious social relationships.

Additionally, the school promotes a warm and humanistic atmosphere, evident in how teachers interact with students, not only in a formal instructional manner but also with emotional support and care. Teachers serve as mentors, role models, and companions to their students. This nurturing environment creates a sense of safety and comfort, a vital foundation for developing positive social character. As Noddings [38] emphasises, strong, caring relationships between teachers and students are essential in value-based education and character formation.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that students' social character development at MTsN 4 Mandailing Natal has been effectively fostered through the principal's strategic leadership, emphasising role modelling, consistent character-based policies, and integrating religious and social programs. Students' daily behaviour consistently reflects key social values such as politeness, discipline, responsibility, empathy, and collaboration. These outcomes highlight the success of a holistic character education model grounded in Islamic values and a supportive school culture. This finding holds important implications for madrasah principals, educational policymakers, and researchers. School leaders are encouraged to implement value-driven leadership practices that combine structural policies with personal example and active engagement in student development. Practical steps include designing regular social-religious programs, strengthening teacher-parent collaboration, and establishing behaviour-based reward systems aligned with character goals. For policymakers, it is essential to support character education through funding, training, and inclusion in national curricula. Future research could explore comparative studies between madrasahs and general schools, examine longitudinal impacts of character-based leadership, or assess how different cultural settings influence the effectiveness of such leadership in shaping students' social behaviour.

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