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## The Principal's Leadership Strategy in Developing the Religious Character of Students at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the principal's leadership role in fostering religious character at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen. The background of the problem indicates that the school's religious character is not yet fully optimal, thus requiring the principal's active involvement in instilling religious values into daily routines. This study focuses on how the principal's leadership influences the implementation of religious character in the school environment, including the strategies employed and the obstacles encountered. This study uses a qualitative case study approach, including in-depth interviews with the principal. The findings indicate that the principal successfully builds religious character through exemplary behavior, daily worship habits, the provision of religious symbols, and regular school studies. However, the main challenge faced is the lack of discipline among some students in carrying out religious activities. This study concludes that effective school leadership, supported by continuous assessment and collaboration across the entire school community, can foster a conducive environment for the development of student character grounded in religious principles. Prospects for further research include steps to maintain and enhance the established religious culture.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Referring to Article 3 of Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, the goal of education is not solely focused on cognitive aspects, but also emphasizes the development of students' character based on faith, piety, and noble character. In fact, applying religious values to students still faces significant obstacles. Various deviant behaviors are still frequently encountered, ranging from low discipline in worship to the lack of respect for teachers to the erosion of manners in everyday social interactions.

According to the 2020 report of the Ministry of Education and Culture, the development of religious character is one of the main challenges in implementing the

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Strengthening of Character Education (PPK) in secondary schools [1]. This phenomenon is also evident in various Islamic-based schools, including Muhammadiyah schools. Despite having religious programs, they still face challenges in consistently instilling religious values in students. In the era of modernization and digitalization, the influence of social media and popular culture is also increasingly strong in shaping adolescent behavior, so religious values are often marginalized [2].

Although numerous studies have addressed character education in schools, research on principals' leadership strategies to strengthen religious character in vocational schools remains limited. Religious character holds a strategic position among the five main pillars of the Character Education and Strengthening (PPK) program. These values are not limited to rituals of faith and piety, but also encompass dimensions of tolerance, orderly worship, and social ethics. Cahyono (2016) emphasized that failure to internalize religious values can have serious implications, triggering moral degradation and causing students to become disoriented amidst the onslaught of negative impacts of global culture. Schools, as formal educational institutions, play a crucial role in instilling religious values through the curriculum, student activities, and school culture. One of the determining factors in instilling religious character in schools is the principal's leadership. The principal serves as a manager, supervisor, and spiritual role model for all school members. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how the principal's leadership strategy can foster students' religious character in a planned and sustainable manner.

Principal leadership is the principal's ability to direct, influence, and motivate school residents to achieve educational goals [3]. In the context of religiosity, the principal plays a role in fostering religious values by serving as an example in daily behavior, strengthening religious culture in the school environment, making religious activities a habit, and supporting students' religious activities [4]. Research by Henderikus Dasrimin [5] shows that the principal's spiritual leadership style significantly influences the formation of religious character in Islamic secondary schools. Therefore, the principal's leadership strategy can be a key factor in addressing students' weak religious character. Therefore, the principal's leadership strategy for developing students' religious character at Muhammadiyah 1 Vocational School, Sragen, is important to research.

The importance of religious character in education is not merely a complement to the curriculum, but rather a moral and spiritual foundation that determines the direction of students' ethical development and personal integrity amid moral degradation [6]. Religious character serves as an internal compass that guides students to align intellectual intelligence with moral virtue, so that schools not only produce cognitively competent graduates but also possess strong principles. Therefore, the principal's role is crucial, as he or she serves as both a manager and a central figure in formulating strategic policies, creating a spiritually nuanced school ecosystem, and ensuring the consistent and measurable implementation of religious values across all aspects of the educational unit.

Further research shows that the principal's leadership strategy in internalizing religious character rests on exemplary leadership. The principal functions not only as a manager who establishes formal rules, but also as a central figure who inspires the school community through consistency between words and actions in religious matters [7]. This

strategy is implemented through structured habituation policies, such as collective routine worship and the integration of spiritual values into daily activities. This aligns with findings that the effectiveness of character building depends heavily on the leader's ability to transform religious values into social norms shared by all elements of the school [8].

The principal ensures that religious values are not limited to religious education subjects but also underpin the learning process in science and social studies, thereby avoiding a dichotomy between science and knowledge [9]. This strategy is supported by the provision of representative worship facilities and infrastructure, as well as intensive academic supervision that emphasizes students' affective aspects. By creating a conducive environment, the principal successfully fosters a school culture that supports the continuous moral development of students, thereby enabling religious character to serve as the foundation for students' intellectual intelligence [10].

Based on initial observations and interviews with the principal at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen, the school already conducts several religious activities, including congregational prayers, morning Quran recitation, and regular religious studies. However, not all students consistently participate in these activities. This research is expected to contribute to identifying and developing leadership strategies that the principal of SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen can implement to improve the school's religious character. One innovation that can be introduced is a transformational leadership approach that emphasizes empowering and motivating students and teachers to actively participate in religious activities. The principal is expected to be more intentional in providing strong role models for students and in integrating religious values into all learning activities and school management.

## 2. METHOD

This research uses a case study approach to understand the principal's leadership role in fostering religious character at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen. Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews with the principal and on-site observations. Documentation analysis was also conducted to review the school's religious policies and programs.

Data validity was ensured through triangulation techniques, combining data from interviews, observations, and documentation to confirm research findings with informants. This approach aimed to gain a deep, holistic understanding of the principal's role in fostering religious character at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. RESULTS

This study examines the principal's leadership role in developing religious character at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen. The research findings reveal that the principal plays a crucial role in shaping a school climate that supports the implementation of religious character. In addition to serving as a policy maker, the principal also serves as a role model for all school members, including teachers and students. The principal's commitment to strengthening religious character is evident in the consistent, firm implementation of policies

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that include regular activities such as congregational prayer, religious study, and commemoration of Islamic holidays, with the full involvement of the entire school community. These activities are integrated into the school's routine to deeply instill religious values in students' and teachers' daily routines.

Religious activities at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen include daily congregational Dhuhur and Asr prayers, as well as Dhuha and Mujahadah prayers held before the learning process begins. In addition, the principal also organizes annual events, including the commemoration of the Night of Faith and Piety (MABIT), Isra' Mi'raj, and the Birthday of the Prophet Muhammad SAW. All of these activities are mandatory for students and teachers and serve as a forum for cultivating and strengthening religious values in the school environment. In addition to coordinating the implementation of these activities, the principal also serves as a direct role model by participating in congregational prayers and other religious activities. Through this approach, the principal goes beyond simply providing instructions and demonstrates personal dedication to religious aspects, ultimately inspiring teachers and students to follow suit.

Leadership at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen adopts an approach to internalizing religious values through modeling and systematic, routine practices. In its implementation, teachers are directed to go beyond mere theoretical knowledge by emphasizing the applicability of religious values in students' daily lives. This habituation strategy is manifested through a series of religious activities that require high discipline, including the obligation to perform congregational prayers integrated with the academic schedule and intensive participation in various institutional religious programs. Through the synergy between the principal's managerial direction and teachers' roles, these spiritual values are integrated into students' daily behavior within the school environment.

In an effort to strengthen religious character, the principal also pays attention to the school environment to create an Islamic atmosphere. At SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen, this is achieved by placing religious symbols, such as religious slogans, in classrooms and other common areas. Furthermore, the school provides adequate supporting facilities, such as a comfortable prayer room and complete prayer equipment, to facilitate the smooth running of worship activities. These facilities are deliberately provided so that students and teachers can perform worship more easily and peacefully in the school environment. The presence of these facilities and physical infrastructure demonstrates the school's commitment to fostering religious character, not only through activities but also through the arrangement of the physical environment that supports daily religious practices.

The principal of SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen implemented comprehensive strategies to build students' religious character, ensuring these values are firmly embedded in their lives. This strategy was implemented through the habituation of daily worship for the entire school community, including congregational Dhuha, Mujahadah, and Dhuhur prayers. The principal also strengthened the religious aspect by developing a school vision and mission grounded in religious values, making the habituation program an annual feature, and ensuring that the school's worship facilities were well-maintained and comfortable.

The principal of SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen implemented a three-level, planned leadership strategy to ensure the effective formation of students' religious character. In the

short term, the school focused on consistent daily habits, such as congregational Dhuha and Dhuhur prayers, as well as joint mujahadah activities to strengthen the school community's spiritual routine. In the medium term, the strategy focused on periodic activities, such as holding weekly religious studies, conducting almsgiving, and commemorating Islamic holidays, to strengthen the bonds of religious values within the school. Furthermore, teachers were given special training to integrate religious values into classroom learning. In the long term, the principal strengthened the foundation of character through fundamental institutional policies. This was done by aligning the school curriculum with a vision and mission based on religious values. This long-term strategy also included the construction and improvement of comfortable religious infrastructure and the awarding of prizes to students who demonstrated good character.

The results of this study support Koentjaraningrat's theory, as explained by Asmaun Sahlan (2012). According to this theory, a strong culture can be formed by three main elements: held values, everyday activities, and supporting symbols. At SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen, these three elements have been operating very efficiently over the past three years. Religious values are not only discussed theoretically but also directly practiced through daily routine worship. Furthermore, the presence of symbols such as religious slogans in various corners of the school helps the school community always remember and be aware of the importance of religious teachings in everyday life.

However, while the principal and the entire school community have endeavored to strengthen religious culture, challenges remain in practice. A key issue that frequently arises is student discipline during religious activities. Although school regulations are quite strict, not all students have the inner awareness to practice their religious duties wholeheartedly. Some students appear to participate in these activities solely because of school rules, rather than out of a personal desire to practice religious teachings. Therefore, the principal continues to strive to improve students' understanding so that they see religious values not merely as a formal obligation, but as an essential part of developing good character and behavior.

### 3.2. DISCUSSION

The results of this study confirm that the principal's leadership greatly influences the success of religious character formation at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen. In this case, the principal not only acts as a formal policy maker but also appears as a leader who provides a real example and strong motivation for all school members. Through this approach, religious values are not only written rules but are actually practiced by teachers and students in their daily activities. According to Hendro Widodo and Etyk Nurhayati (2020), principal leadership is a series of processes that motivate, guide, and direct all elements of the school toward achieving a mutually agreed-upon vision and goals [11].

This leadership is not merely administrative; it also exerts a strong influence, mobilizing the school community to work in harmony for the benefit of the institution. At SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen, the principal goes beyond simply issuing instructions for religious activities, positioning himself as a primary role model for teachers and students. This is evident in his active participation in routine worship, such as congregational prayer,

which indirectly sends a strong message that religious activities are a priority to be carried out seriously. The principal's direct presence among the school community during worship demonstrates that effective leadership is not just about giving orders, but also about inspiring others through concrete actions and personal example.

The principal's exemplary conduct extends beyond his physical presence at religious services, but is also reflected in his guidance of teachers and students. The principal of SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen plays an active role in ensuring that all members of the school community not only perform religious routines but also internalize the meaning and values behind each activity. Through this approach, he has successfully fostered an understanding that practicing religious teachings is not merely an administrative burden or a formal school obligation, but rather a fundamental foundation for developing a noble character and personality in each individual. This approach aligns with Burns' (1978) theory of transformational leadership, which holds that transformational leaders can inspire subordinates to prioritize common interests over personal interests and foster positive changes within themselves [12]. In this context, the Principal of SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen not only carries out administrative tasks, but also plays a role in changing mindsets and behavior through the power of inspiration and real role models.

The principal of SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen implements a planned habituation process to build sustainable religious character. This is realized through daily agendas, such as congregational Dhuha prayers in the schoolyard and morning mujahadah activities led by teachers in rotation. This habituation is not only aimed at students, but involves the entire school community to create an Islamic religious atmosphere. With consistency in these activities, it is hoped that students' religious character will develop naturally, so that they can participate in religious activities not because of forced rules, but because of the religious values they can learn. This strongly supports the opinion of Duryat and Duryat (2019), who emphasized that the key to building religious character is to transform religious values into habits integrated into daily activities [13]. Routine religious practices at Muhammadiyah 1 Vocational School in Sragen, such as the morning congregational Dhuha prayer, are a concrete manifestation of this habit. If implemented consistently, these activities are believed to foster a balanced character in students, one that not only excels academically but also possesses good moral qualities.

The use of religious character signs is a unique attraction at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen and also strengthens the principal's efforts to instill character in students. The presence of Islamic-themed signs adorning the school walls and the availability of comfortable worship facilities, such as a clean prayer room equipped with prayer facilities, provide a strong visual message to the school community. These facilities and signs serve as daily reminders for students and teachers of the importance of implementing religious values in every school activity. According to Koentjaraningrat's (2009) cultural theory, these signs serve to strengthen religious identity within the school environment. The presence of these signs is not merely decorative; it serves as a visual reminder that accompanies the daily lives of students and teachers. With these signs, the entire school community is constantly reminded to maintain and apply religious values in real life.

8 These signs, from Quranic verses on the walls to posters inviting worship, play a crucial role in creating an Islamic school atmosphere. The presence of these physical elements helps build an environment that naturally supports the development of students' religious character. Through these visual media, religious values are not only conveyed verbally but also present in students' daily lives as constant reminders. Koentjaraningrat explains that character signs are elements that are integrated into the daily lives of society. In the educational sphere, these signs are an important part, serving as a reminder to every individual in the school always to uphold religious values. The presence of these signs ensures that religious messages remain in the learning environment, consistently influencing the attitudes and behavior of all school members [14]. The presence of these signs has been proven to increase the motivation of students and teachers at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen to practice their religious duties consistently and to behave in accordance with religious guidance. In this context, the symbols serve not only as visual reminders but also as reinforcement of the institution's identity, grounded in religious values. Creating a school environment that has strong characteristics, where religious identity is clearly reflected through a combination of physical facilities and the daily behavior of the school community [15].

9 The principal's leadership strategy at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen in building religious character begins with strengthening short-term aspects through daily habits. Activities such as congregational Dhuha prayers, mujahadah, and Dzuhur prayers are not merely routine acts of worship, but rather a managerial tool for disciplining students' spirituality. This is in line with the theory of habituation, which states that behavior performed consistently will crystallize into character [16]. In this case, the principal succeeded in transforming school rules into a daily tradition that involved all aspects of the school, thereby creating uniformity in religious behavior within the educational environment.

In the medium term, the principal expanded the scope of his strategy through human resource capacity building and periodic activities. Regular Thursday study programs and teacher training on integrating religious values demonstrate that the principal understands the importance of teachers' roles as extensions of classroom leadership. By equipping teachers with the ability to integrate religious values into general subjects, the dichotomy between religious and general knowledge can be avoided [17]. This strategy ensures that religious character messages are delivered continuously, both inside and outside formal school hours.

18 This strategy ensures that religious character messages are delivered continuously, both in the long term. In the long term, the success of character internalization in this school rests on strengthening the institutional foundation. The principal strategically aligns the school's vision and mission with religious values, so that the school's religious character becomes its primary identity. This effort is strengthened by the development of religious infrastructure, such as a comfortable prayer room and the provision of religious signs in public areas and outside formal school hours. An environmental arrangement that functions as a visual reminder that unconsciously influences students' subconscious to always behave in accordance with Islamic values [18].

The integration of transformational leadership and environmental creation at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen fosters a strong character education environment. The findings of this study strengthen Koentjaraningrat's concept of religious character, which states that the established religious character of schools is formed from a harmonious blend of values, activities, and signs [19]. In this school, these three elements are interconnected: religious values are present as a philosophical foundation through the vision and mission, daily activities such as dhuha prayer and mujahadah become a concrete manifestation of these values, and physical facilities in the form of a prayer room and religious slogans act as both support and visual reminders. The solidity of these three elements over the past three years proves that the principal's leadership does not only stop at the level of administrative instructions, but has reached the level of creating a comprehensive and structured educational environment [20].

The principal has been able to transform character values into daily practices that are evident and felt by the entire school community. This way, students can apply good character both in the school environment and in their daily lives. By combining personal exemplary behavior during routine worship with the placement of slogan signs in the school environment, the principal effectively builds a school identity thick with religious nuances [21]. This process not only strengthens the discipline of teachers and students but also reinforces the view that religious values are the guiding spirit in every educational activity at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen. This shows that leadership strategies that address structural (policy) and cultural (signs and habits) aspects are much more effective in making the school's religious character permanent [22].

However, this study also found that the biggest challenge in developing religious character is fostering students' intrinsic awareness. Although regulations have been firmly enforced through habituation and adequate infrastructure has been provided, some students still worship to fulfill obligations or simply out of compliance with formal rules. This condition is an important evaluation that indicates that character formation through external discipline and visual signs has not fully guaranteed the existence of deep spiritual appreciation within students [23]. This phenomenon of "obeying the rules" indicates that the religious character is still at the compliance stage, not yet fully internalizing values independently.

Thus, this research suggests that the next leadership strategy at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen should begin by emphasizing a more persuasive and dialogical approach. The principal must continue to innovate in evaluating students' character, not only in terms of physical attendance at worship rituals, but also in assessing students' existential understanding of the urgency of these values for the future and each student's morality. Strengthening this cognitive-affective aspect is crucial so that the religious culture formed through visual signs and habits does not become trapped as mere formality, but becomes a spiritual awareness that students will continue to carry even after they graduate from the educational institution.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The principal's leadership strategy at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Sragen is a key factor in the successful realization of students' religious character. This strategy can be realized through three structured stages: a short-term strategy through the habituation of daily worship, a medium-term strategy through the development of teacher professionalism, and a long-term strategy through the alignment of school policies and the optimization of religious facilities and infrastructure. Thus, this leadership strategy results in a transformation of students' religious character within the school environment, where religious values are not limited to learning materials but have become standards for student behavior in their daily lives. Although there are still challenges related to student discipline that require strengthening internal motivation, consistent leadership, and adequate support facilities, they have proven capable of creating an educational environment conducive to the formation of student morals. This study recommends innovation in character-mentoring methods to increase students' awareness of independent worship, thereby enabling the religious character implemented to be sustained.

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