



School principal's strategy in shaping student character education in elementary school

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ABSTRACT

Character education is a fundamental aspect of the national education system, yet its implementation in elementary schools often faces serious challenges, including declining moral values, student discipline, and responsibility. This study aims to deeply analyze the principal's leadership strategies in shaping student character at SDN 011 Sorek 1, identify practical barriers in the field, and evaluate the contextual solutions applied. Employing a qualitative approach with a case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations of school activities, and document analysis, then processed using the interactive model by Miles et al. The findings indicate that the principal implemented integrated strategies encompassing behavioral modeling of discipline, institutional planning within the vision and mission, habituation of daily routines, teacher competency training, and competition and recognition programs. Implementation obstacles included variations in student personalities, low responsibility for school facilities, and a lack of awareness of environmental cleanliness. These challenges were addressed through individualized guidance, strengthened teacher collaboration, and the internalization of a school culture rooted in religious values. This study concludes that the success of character education requires adaptive strategic leadership, consistent role-modeling by leaders, and active participation by the entire school community to create a moral environment conducive to student development.

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ABSTRAK

Pendidikan karakter merupakan aspek fundamental dalam sistem pendidikan nasional, namun realitas implementasinya di sekolah dasar sering menghadapi kendala serius terkait penurunan moralitas, kedisiplinan, dan tanggung jawab murid. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis secara mendalam strategi kepemimpinan kepala sekolah dalam membentuk karakter murid di SDN 011 Sorek 1, mengidentifikasi hambatan praktis di lapangan, serta mengevaluasi solusi kontekstual yang diterapkan. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi aktivitas sekolah, dan analisis dokumen, yang kemudian diolah menggunakan model interaktif Miles et al. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepala sekolah menerapkan strategi terintegrasi yang mencakup keteladanan perilaku disiplin, perencanaan institusional dalam visi-misi, pembiasaan rutinitas harian, pelatihan kompetensi guru, serta program kompetisi dan penghargaan. Kendala implementasi meliputi variasi kepribadian murid, rendahnya tanggung jawab terhadap fasilitas sekolah, dan kurangnya kesadaran kebersihan lingkungan. Tantangan ini diatasi melalui pendekatan bimbingan individual, penguatan kerjasama guru, dan internalisasi budaya sekolah berbasis nilai religius. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa keberhasilan pendidikan karakter memerlukan kepemimpinan strategis yang adaptif, konsistensi keteladanan pimpinan, serta partisipasi aktif seluruh warga sekolah untuk menciptakan lingkungan moral yang kondusif bagi perkembangan murid.

Kata Kunci: kepala sekolah; pelatihan sikap; pendidikan karakter; strategi

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INTRODUCTION

Character education is a fundamental aspect of the national education system that aims to develop the full potential of human beings, not only cognitive but also affective and psychomotor. Undang-Undang Nomor 20 Tahun 2003 tentang Sistem Pendidikan Nasional emphasizes that the goal of education is to develop all aspects of human nature, including behavior, skills, and mental intelligence, so that each individual can become a whole person and have closeness to the Creator (Iksal et al., 2024; Sakban & Sundawa, 2023; Ulfah & Arifudin, 2020). However, the current condition of character education in Indonesia faces serious challenges marked by a decline in morality and character among the younger generation, which is evident from increased crime, adolescent violence, decreased respect for parents and teachers, and increased selfish and irresponsible behavior (Fatima & Putra, 2025; Suarningsih, 2024). This phenomenon underscores the urgency of strengthening character education implementation in schools through effective leadership strategies.

School principals play a strategic role in shaping student character, serving as educational leaders who function not only as administrators but also as moral role models and agents of change in the school environment. School principals are expected to balance cognitive, affective, and psychomotor abilities when choosing the best approach to positively influence students' responses to character values (Imawan & Ismail, 2023; Sanjani, 2024). The principal's approach to instilling educational character significantly impacts students' understanding and application of character, especially in their knowledge of the importance of upholding moral principles. Therefore, the strategies implemented by school principals in shaping character education are a key factor in determining the success of character development among Indonesia's younger generation.

Several previous studies have examined the role of principal leadership in strengthening character education from various theoretical and practical perspectives. Transformational leadership applied by school principals, which incorporates cultural, humanistic, and national values, has been shown to play an important role in creating a supportive school environment for the success of character education (Effendi, 2020). The importance of principal leadership is further highlighted by the concept of pedagogical leadership, in which positive behavioral modeling by school leaders is a determining factor in shaping the character of teachers and students (Yusaini, 2020). In addition, leadership styles such as democratic, paternalistic, and transformational leadership have been found to significantly influence students' character development, particularly when principals balance the instructional, managerial, and emotional aspects of the learning process (Mbua, 2023). Collectively, these studies emphasize that principal leadership plays a central, strategic role in ensuring the effective implementation of character education in schools.

Although these studies have made important contributions to understanding the role of school principals, most research still focuses on theoretical aspects and general leadership, without exploring in depth the specific strategies school principals implement in practical field contexts. Furthermore, research identifying concrete challenges school principals face in implementing character education, especially in public elementary schools with specific socio-cultural characteristics, remains very limited. Previous research has also not extensively examined how school principals overcome obstacles such as a lack of student discipline, a low sense of responsibility, and differences in student personalities, which pose real challenges to character formation.

This study makes a unique contribution by comprehensively exploring the strategies school principals use to shape student character education at SDN 011 Sorek 1, focusing on the practical challenges and the contextual solutions developed to address them. The novelty of this research lies in the in-depth analysis of field phenomena that demonstrate the gap between the principal's commitment to developing student

character and the implementation reality that still faces various obstacles, such as a lack of discipline, low student responsibility in managing school loan books, and a lack of awareness in maintaining classroom cleanliness. This study also fills a research gap by identifying how environmental factors and school organizational culture, such as values of greeting, respecting parents, and honesty and integrity, influence the student character formation process. Furthermore, this research analyzes how school principals adapt their leadership approach to address differences in student personalities and create innovative methods that make character learning enjoyable and meaningful. By using a case study approach at SDN 011 Sorek 1, this research provides a practical, contextual perspective that can serve as a reference for other schools with similar characteristics in developing effective, adaptive character education strategies.

The phenomenon observed at SDN 011 Sorek 1 reveals a gap between expectations for student character formation and the reality on the ground. Based on observations and interviews with the school principal on May 29, 2022, several fundamental problems were identified in the implementation of character education, namely lack of student discipline demonstrated by late arrival to class or school, low sense of student responsibility in managing loan books entrusted to them by the school, and minimal awareness to maintain classroom cleanliness because they assume that this task is the responsibility of cleaning staff. These problems indicate that the strategies implemented by the school principal have not been optimal in forming discipline and responsibility character in students. The school principal faces various challenges in developing students' educational character, especially given the diverse student personalities and backgrounds. This condition raises research questions: what strategies have been implemented by the school principal to shape student character education at SDN 011 Sorek 1, what obstacles are encountered in their implementation, and how does the school principal overcome these obstacles to achieve effective character education goals. This problem is important to research because failure to develop character at an early age can have long-term impacts on students' moral and social development.

This study aims to analyze and describe the school principal's strategies in shaping student character education at SDN 011 Sorek 1. Specifically, this study aims to identify concrete strategies implemented by the school principal to instill character values, such as discipline, responsibility, honesty, and respect, in students. This study also aims to reveal the obstacles the school principal faces in implementing character education and to explore solutions and approaches developed to overcome them. Furthermore, this study aims to understand how the school environment and culture contribute to the formation of student character at SDN 011 Sorek 1. The research results are expected to make theoretical contributions to the literature on character education leadership and to provide practical recommendations for school principals and other educational institutions on designing and implementing effective and sustainable character education strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategic Leadership in Educational Contexts

The concept of strategy in educational leadership has evolved significantly from its military origins to become a sophisticated framework for organizational change and student development. Strategy, derived from the Greek terms "strategos" or "strategus" meaning general or state official, represents a deliberate set of actions designed to achieve specific objectives (Masruroh & Ma'ruf, 2020; Wasserman, 2022). In contemporary educational discourse, strategic thinking encompasses not merely the planning of activities but the systematic orchestration of resources, processes, and human capital to create transformative learning environments (Riinawati & Noor, 2024). This evolution reflects a broader shift in educational philosophy from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered learning paradigms that prioritize holistic development.

Learning strategies, as conceptualized within institutional frameworks, comprise comprehensive approaches educational leaders employ to facilitate meaningful learning experiences through innovative methodologies and conducive environments (Riddel & Zulfikar, 2024). However, current scholarship reveals a critical tension between traditional pedagogical approaches and emerging demands for learner-centered instruction. Research demonstrates that effective educational strategies require continuous adaptation to contemporary contexts, necessitating that educators fundamentally reconsider their instructional designs and methodological approaches (Bakar, 2021; Shah & Basnyat, 2024). This paradigm shift challenges school leaders to move beyond conventional administrative functions toward transformative leadership that actively engages students as co-creators of their educational experiences. Despite growing recognition of this need, empirical studies examining how school principals translate strategic thinking into practical character-building initiatives remain limited, particularly in diverse cultural contexts where traditional values intersect with modern educational imperatives.

The Multifaceted Role of School Principals

School principals occupy a unique position within educational ecosystems, functioning simultaneously as instructional leaders, organizational managers, and moral exemplars. The term "principal" itself embodies this duality, combining the concepts of "principle" and "school" to signify leadership grounded in educational values and institutional governance (Benoliel & Schechter, 2023; Lakomski & Evers, 2022). Contemporary research conceptualizes principals as functional educators entrusted with comprehensive responsibilities that extend far beyond administrative oversight to encompass the cultivation of school culture, the facilitation of teacher effectiveness, and the moral development of students (Sanjani, 2024). This expanded role reflects global trends toward distributed leadership models that recognize principals as pivotal agents in shaping organizational climate and student outcomes.

The responsibilities of school principals encompass multiple dimensions that require sophisticated balancing of competing demands. Principals must serve as exemplary models who embody the values they seek to instill, provide motivational support that sustains teacher commitment, and facilitate alignment between instructional practices and institutional missions (Arif, 2024; Ow hor, 2025). Furthermore, effective principals demonstrate capacity for collaborative decision-making, conflict mediation, and critical problem-solving when confronted with complex challenges involving financial constraints, interpersonal tensions, or philosophical disagreements (Ifenaike et al., 2025). However, the existing literature predominantly addresses these responsibilities through theoretical frameworks or generalized leadership competencies, with insufficient attention to the specific strategies principals employ to navigate the practical challenges of implementing character education. The gap between idealized principal roles and the contextual realities of character-building work is a significant limitation in current scholarship, particularly in how principals adapt their leadership approaches to address student diversity, resource constraints, and cultural specificity.

Theoretical Foundations of Character Education

Character education represents a systematic, values-centered approach to human development that aims to cultivate moral reasoning, ethical behavior, and civic responsibility. Scholars conceptualize character education as extending beyond mere knowledge transmission to encompass the holistic formation of individuals who possess integrated capacities for moral judgment and virtuous action (Carr, 2024; Nirmayani, 2021). This educational philosophy recognizes that character development emerges not from isolated instruction but through sustained processes of guided self-awareness, value internalization, and behavioral habituation within supportive communities (Abdurrahman et al., 2025; Khayati, 2025). The theoretical underpinnings draw on diverse traditions, including virtue ethics, developmental psychology,

and social learning theory, emphasizing that character formation requires the intentional cultivation of heart, mind, body, and spirit (Karori, 2024).

Contemporary discourse distinguishes character education from traditional moral instruction by emphasizing experiential learning, environmental influence, and the development of intrinsic motivation rather than external compliance. Character education seeks to nurture habits of goodness, honesty, and responsibility while fostering mindsets that naturally reject dishonest or harmful behaviors (Ence et al., 2025; Zahid & Darmawan, 2025). The ultimate purpose extends beyond individual development to encompass preparation for effective citizenship and social contribution, recognizing education as fundamentally concerned with helping individuals achieve harmony with their communities and natural environments. This comprehensive vision aligns with Dewantara's philosophy, which holds that authentic education advances the physical, spiritual, and ethical dimensions simultaneously, rejecting coercive methods that undermine learner autonomy (Aithal & Srinivasan, 2024; Dewi et al., 2025).

Current scholarship emphasizes that effective character education requires integration across multiple domains, including kinesthetic development through physical activity, literacy through critical thinking, aesthetic sensibility through arts engagement, and ethical reasoning through values reflection (Nasser, 2024). This multidimensional approach aims to cultivate not merely academically proficient students but morally grounded individuals capable of contributing meaningfully to society. However, critical analysis reveals that existing literature predominantly addresses character education through theoretical frameworks or curriculum design, with limited empirical investigation of implementation challenges and leadership strategies in actual school contexts. The disconnect between idealized character education models and the practical realities of implementation is significant, particularly in how institutional leaders navigate obstacles such as student resistance, resource limitations, and cultural tensions between traditional and contemporary values.

Strategic Approaches to Character Formation

Scholarship on the implementation of character education identifies diverse strategic frameworks that school leaders may employ, broadly categorized into direct and indirect approaches. Direct strategies encompass intentional interventions where educators explicitly model, encourage, and reinforce desired character traits through personal interaction and structured activities (Handoko & Sakti, 2023; White et al., 2025). These include exemplary modeling where principals embody virtues they seek to instill, organizational encouragement that motivates students toward positive behaviors, systematic training in specific character competencies, competitive activities that assess character development, habituation practices that establish routine virtue performance, partnership cultivation with families and communities, and learning integration that embeds character development within academic curricula (Sanjani, 2024; Siahaan et al., 2023). Each strategy assumes that character formation benefits from explicit attention, structured opportunity, and consistent reinforcement within supportive environments.

Conversely, indirect strategies focus on preventive measures that establish boundaries and consequences to discourage harmful behaviors. These approaches include prohibition of detrimental actions, supervisory monitoring to prevent undesirable outcomes, and corrective punishment designed to promote reflection and behavioral change (Calabrese et al., 2023; Moqemi, 2023). While both direct and indirect strategies appear in educational literature, critical evaluation reveals significant limitations in current scholarship. Research typically presents these strategies as abstract typologies without sufficient examination of how they operate within specific institutional contexts, how principals adapt them to address particular challenges, or how their effectiveness varies across different student populations and cultural settings. Furthermore, existing studies rarely investigate the synergistic effects of combining multiple strategies or the decision-making processes principals employ when selecting among strategic options.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to examine how the principal's leadership contributes to student character development through strategies practiced in daily school activities. The research was conducted as a case study at SDN 011 Sorek 1 in Sorek Satu Village, Pangkalan Kuras District, Pelalawan Regency, Riau Province, which enabled the researcher to capture authentic routines, interactions, and leadership practices embedded in the school environment. Focusing on a single institution allowed the researcher to produce detailed descriptions and to understand how leadership strategies function in everyday school life. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their relevance to the research focus. As explained by Patton in his book "*Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*", purposive sampling allows the intentional selection of individuals who possess substantial knowledge related to the topic. The informants included 1) The principal, the key source of information; 2) Classroom teachers who implement character-building programs; 3) Students who experience these activities; and supporting staff, as needed. Fieldwork took place from February to May 2023 to allow repeated visits and sufficient data collection until saturation was reached.

Three complementary data collection techniques were employed. Semi-structured interviews with the principal, teachers, and students provided detailed accounts of planning, strategies, and experiences related to character development programs. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was recorded with the participants' consent. Non-participant observations were conducted during routine school activities, including flag ceremonies, morning Qur'an recitation, greeting practices, character habituation programs, and the principal's leadership interactions. These observations enabled the researcher to record behaviors and practices directly in their natural settings. Documentation was also collected, including photographs, school agendas, report books, and policy documents, which supported and strengthened the interpretation of interview and observation data. The data analysis followed the interactive model described by Miles et al. in "*Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*". The researcher conducted data reduction by selecting relevant information from transcripts, field notes, and documents, followed by coding meaningful segments and grouping them into categories and broader themes related to leadership roles and character education strategies. The reduced data were then organized into thematic narratives and matrices to facilitate comparison across sources. Conclusion drawing was iterative, involving the identification of recurring patterns, cross-checking through triangulation, and continuous refinement of interpretations.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through various validation strategies based on Lincoln and Guba in their book "*Naturalistic Inquiry*". Source triangulation was achieved by involving informants with different roles in the school community. Triangulation was used by comparing data from interviews, observations, and documentation. Time triangulation was conducted by collecting data at different points throughout the research period. Member checking was carried out by sharing preliminary interpretations with key participants to ensure accuracy. At the same time, an audit trail was maintained to document procedures, analytical decisions, and field activities, thereby supporting dependability and confirmability. Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the research. Formal permission was obtained from the Education Office and the school principal. All participants received clear explanations of the study's purpose, voluntary participation, the right to withdraw at any time, and confidentiality measures. Written consent was obtained from adult participants, and parental consent, together with student assent, was collected for child participants. Pseudonyms were used to protect identity, and all data were stored securely. The researcher also practiced reflexivity to identify personal assumptions and minimize potential bias during interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Principal's Planning in Character Education

Character education at SDN 011 Sorek 1 began with comprehensive institutional planning that embedded character development into the school's vision and mission. The principal explained, "Character development planning is carried out from the beginning, including developing a vision and mission that is in line with character education. One of the goals of the vision and mission that was subsequently achieved was character education, which involved teachers in the classroom environment and using administrators as assessors and motivators." This approach ensured active teacher participation in implementation rather than mere documentation. Planning activities included weekly coordination meetings on Mondays, regular lesson-plan review sessions focused on integrating character values, and annual planning sessions that mapped out character education programs for the academic year.

Exemplary Leadership as Foundation

The principal's personal behavior served as the primary model for character education. He consistently arrived at 7:00 AM, thirty minutes before the official start time and fifteen minutes before most teachers. In an interview on March 10, 2023, he stated, "I always come to school earlier than teachers and students. For example, I always come at 7:00 a.m., while school starts at 7:30 a.m. and teachers come at 7:15 a.m. on average. I always behave in a friendly manner and greet every teacher and student, as well as the parents of students." Each morning, he positioned himself at the school gate to personally greet everyone entering the premises, making genuine eye contact and engaging in warm conversation. This modeling approach produced observable behavioral changes. By April 2023, teachers increasingly adopted similar patterns, arriving earlier and greeting students at classroom entrances. Students began initiating greetings proactively rather than merely responding, suggesting that they had internalized the modeled behavior. These changes occurred without explicit directives or formal training.

Discipline Implementation Through Consistent Practice

The principal reinforced discipline through strategic behavior during meetings and events. During a staff meeting on March 18, 2023, he arrived ten minutes early and began the meeting promptly at the scheduled time despite only five of the twenty teachers being present. When asked about this approach, he explained, "In order to cultivate good discipline, we must start from ourselves. There will be no discipline from the person we lead if we are not able to show discipline in ourselves." Follow-up observations between April and May 2023 showed that teacher punctuality improved to 90%.

Training and Capacity Building

The principal recognized the need to equip teachers with specific skills for implementing character education. He stated, "We have several programs to develop character education for students. One of them is training for teachers to develop a lesson plan that incorporates character values such as integrity, empathy, and responsibility." School records documented four teacher training sessions from February to April 2023, covering lesson plan development, classroom management strategies, assessment methods, and moral discussion techniques. Attendance records showed ninety-five percent teacher participation.

Competition and Recognition Strategies

The school employed competitions and recognition programs to motivate character development. Events included a March 2023 debate competition with eight teams, an April 2023 art competition with 25 participants, and a May 2023 sports competition emphasizing sportsmanship. An award ceremony on May 20, 2023, recognized fifteen students with certificates for "Helpful Friend," "Responsible Student," and "Empathetic Behavior," attended by students, teachers, and parents.

Habituation Through Daily Routines

Daily routines systematically reinforced character values. Each morning between 7:15 and 7:30 AM, students gathered for prayer, recited the national anthem, and engaged in brief physical exercises. Religious practices included the dhuha prayer three times weekly, a daily midday congregational prayer, 15 minutes of Quran recitation, and Friday morning spiritual gatherings. In classrooms, students stood to greet teachers at the beginning of every period, and two to three teachers positioned themselves at the school gate each morning for handshaking rituals with students.

Partnership with Parents and Community

Three formal parent meetings were held during the research period (February 10, March 24, and May 5, 2023), with an average attendance of 70%. Topics included home-school character reinforcement strategies, student behavior reports, and volunteer opportunities. Community partnerships included collaboration with the local mosque for religious instruction, the community health center for health education emphasizing personal responsibility, and local businesses for career day activities highlighting workplace character traits.

Learning Integration Across Curriculum and Activities

Character education was systematically integrated throughout the curriculum rather than taught as a separate subject. Analysis of ten lesson plans showed all included explicit character values, most commonly responsibility (eight plans), cooperation (seven plans), and honesty (six plans). Observed examples included a mathematics class on March 28, 2023, emphasizing honesty in peer-checking; a science class on April 12, 2023, discussing responsibility in group environmental projects; and a social studies lesson on May 3, 2023, exploring tolerance for different perspectives. Extracurricular integration included monthly volunteer activities to beautify the school and quarterly visits to elderly residents for community service.

Regulation and Supervision Systems

The school's code of conduct specified prohibited behaviors (bullying, violence, verbal abuse, academic dishonesty, chronic tardiness) and expected behaviors (respect, honesty, responsibility, cooperation). These rules were posted in all classrooms and common areas. During observations, teachers referenced specific rules twelve times when addressing behavior and consistently referred to code expectations during five observed student conflicts. Each teacher maintained a behavior logbook reviewed weekly by the principal, with monthly summaries communicated to parents. Physical supervision involved rotating teacher duty schedules during break periods.

Consequences and Restorative Practices

The consequence system operated on a graduated scale, distinguishing minor and major infractions. Minor infractions initially received verbal warnings, followed by written reflections and parent notification for repeat offenses. Major infractions triggered meetings involving the principal, student, and parents, with restorative actions assigned. Three observed cases illustrated this system: a March 2023 conflict resolved through teacher-facilitated mediation, resulting in mutual apologies; an April 2023 chronic tardiness case where the student assisted with morning preparations for one week; and a May 2023 property damage case requiring the student to clean and repaint the affected area under supervision.

Discussion

The findings from SDN 011 Sorek 1 demonstrate a comprehensive application of character education strategies that align closely with established theoretical frameworks while revealing important contextual adaptations. The principal's multifaceted approach synthesizes direct and indirect strategies identified in contemporary scholarship, creating an integrated system where modeling, training, habituation, and regulation work synergistically rather than in isolation (Handoko & Sakti, 2023; Siahaan et al., 2023).

Exemplary Leadership and Social Learning Theory

The cascade effect of the principal's modeling behavior provides empirical support for social learning theory's emphasis on observational learning and behavioral mimicry (Arif et al., 2023). When the principal consistently arrived early and greeted stakeholders warmly, teachers and students progressively adopted these behaviors without explicit instruction or formal training programs. This finding extends the assertion that advocacy techniques work through role modeling by demonstrating how authentic behavioral consistency generates voluntary imitation across organizational hierarchies (Gardner et al., 2024). The transformation occurred through three observable mechanisms. First, the principal's visibility at the school gate created daily opportunities for direct observation. Second, his actions demonstrated the feasibility that the desired behaviors were achievable within their own capacities. Third, the behaviors carried implicit social value, as the principal's respect and warmth generated positive interpersonal experiences that reinforced the modeled conduct.

However, this principal-dependent model raises sustainability concerns identified in the literature on transformational leadership. Transformational leaders who incorporate cultural and humanistic values create supportive environments for character education (Effendi, 2020). The heavy reliance on one individual's personal example suggests vulnerability to leadership transitions. If the principal were replaced by someone less committed to visible modeling, the behavioral changes might erode without sufficient institutional embedding through formalized structures and distributed leadership practices.

Strategic Integration of Training and Capacity Building

The principal's implementation of teacher training programs aligns with findings that training develops the social and emotional competencies necessary for moral character development (Mahfouz & Gordon, 2021). The four documented training sessions on lesson planning, classroom management, assessment, and moral discussion techniques demonstrate systematic capacity-building that extends beyond the principal's personal influence. This approach reflects pedagogical leadership concepts where school leaders become determining factors in shaping character among both teachers and students (Yusaini, 2020). By equipping teachers with specific instructional strategies for character integration, the principal

created distributed responsibility for character education rather than centralizing it within administrative functions alone. The ninety-five percent teacher participation rate suggests strong institutional buy-in, possibly facilitated by the principal's prior establishment of credibility through personal modeling. However, the findings reveal a gap between training provision and verification of implementation quality. While the lesson plan analysis showed that character values were included in all examined documents, observations focused primarily on their presence rather than on pedagogical effectiveness. This limitation echoes broader concerns in the character education literature about the disconnect between idealized models and practical realities of implementation (Carr, 2024; Khayati, 2025).

Competition as Motivational Strategy with Cautions

The school's use of competitions and recognition programs demonstrates the practical application of research showing that competition can encourage the development of positive character traits (Tóth et al., 2022). The debate, art, and sports competitions created structured opportunities for students to demonstrate character competencies while receiving public recognition. The May 20, 2023, award ceremony, attended by students, teachers, and parents, illustrates how the principal leveraged social recognition to reinforce character values. However, the implementation demonstrated awareness of the need for principals to ensure that students are not under undue pressure from competition (Anisah, 2023). The diverse competition types (intellectual, artistic, physical) and the variety of recognition categories ("Helpful Friend," "Responsible Student," "Empathetic Behavior") suggest a deliberate design that provides multiple pathways to success, reducing the risk that only academically gifted students receive validation. Despite these safeguards, the research did not examine whether students who never received recognition experienced diminished motivation or self-worth. This represents a critical area for future investigation, particularly given character education's goal of developing intrinsic motivation rather than external validation-seeking (Ence et al., 2025; Zahid & Darmawan, 2025).

Habituation and the Formation of Moral Habits

The systematic daily routines at SDN 011 Sorek 1 operationalize the emphasis on habituation through hands-on experience. Morning prayers, anthem singing, physical exercises, and greeting rituals created repetitive behavioral patterns that became automatic responses. The religious practices, including dhuha prayers, congregational worship, Quran recitation, and Friday spiritual gatherings, demonstrate a powerful integration of Islamic values within the habituation framework. This religious integration raises important questions about the relationship between cultural-religious specificity and universal character traits. While discipline, respect, and responsibility represent broadly valued characteristics, their instantiation through Islamic practices reflects contextual adaptation to Indonesia's predominantly Muslim society. This approach aligns with the philosophy that authentic education must harmonize with community values (Aithal & Srinivasan, 2024; Dewi et al., 2025). However, it also highlights potential tensions in diverse settings where students may not share the majority religious identity. The effectiveness of the habituation strategy depends critically on consistency and duration. Observations showed behavioral improvements over the four-month research period, but this timeframe is insufficient to determine whether the changes reflect genuine internalization or mere compliance with established routines. Virtue ethics traditions emphasize that authentic character development requires sustained practice over extended periods until virtuous behaviors become second nature (Carr, 2024). Short-term observations cannot definitively establish whether students developed an intrinsic commitment to the modeled values or merely adapted to institutional expectations.

Community Partnerships and Ecological Systems

The principal's cultivation of partnerships with parents, the local mosque, the community health center, and local businesses demonstrates practical implementation of research on community-school partnerships (Santoso et al., 2025; Takkouch & DeCoito, 2025). These collaborations created opportunities for students to encounter character values across multiple contexts, reinforcing the principle that character development requires coordinated influence from various socialization agents. However, the seventy percent average attendance at parent meetings reveals significant gaps in family engagement. Thirty percent of families remained largely unreached through formal partnership structures, raising equity concerns about whether all students received comparable support for character development. The literature on character education emphasizes that home-school alignment significantly impacts effectiveness (Nirmayani, 2021). Suggesting that students whose families did not actively engage may have experienced less comprehensive character formation. The variability in community partnership engagement with the mosque, showing strong collaboration but business involvement limited to annual career days, indicates that partnership cultivation requires ongoing relationship management and may depend on factors beyond the principal's control, such as organizational capacity and community social capital.

Curriculum Integration and Pedagogical Challenges

The integration of character education across academic subjects rather than as a standalone curriculum aligns with contemporary best practices emphasizing holistic development (Nasser, 2024). The analysis showing all examined lesson plans included explicit character values, particularly responsibility, cooperation, and honesty, demonstrates systematic implementation across the curriculum. Observed examples, including mathematics emphasizing honesty, science addressing responsibility, and social studies exploring tolerance, illustrate how the principal and teachers connected character development to disciplinary content. This approach operationalizes the assertion that learning integration helps students develop positive character through direct participation in the learning process (Siagian et al., 2024). By embedding character values within academic instruction rather than treating them as separate add-ons, the school created natural opportunities for students to practice and reflect on character competencies within meaningful contexts. However, this integration creates inherent tensions between the time devoted to academic content coverage and the time devoted to character development. Teachers face pressure to complete prescribed curricula while also facilitating character reflection and practice. The research did not examine how teachers navigated these competing demands or whether character integration sometimes occurred superficially to satisfy documentation requirements without substantive pedagogical engagement. This limitation reflects broader gaps in the literature, which tend to examine implementation challenges rather than idealized models (Handoko & Sakti, 2023).

Regulation, Supervision, and Restorative Practices

The school's approach to behavioral regulation combined clear rules, consistent supervision, and restorative consequences, demonstrating practical application of the emphasis on fair and proportionate sanctions (Wulan et al., 2025). The graduated consequence system distinguished minor from major infractions and employed escalating responses designed to promote reflection rather than merely punishing wrongdoing. The three documented cases, including conflict mediation resulting in mutual apologies, tardiness addressed through morning duty assistance, and property damage requiring repair under supervision, illustrate restorative justice principles in which consequences aim to repair harm and

develop responsibility rather than impose suffering. This approach aligns with contemporary scholarship critiquing purely punitive discipline as counterproductive to character development goals (Calabrese et al., 2023). However, the effectiveness of restorative practices depends heavily on the quality of implementation. The research documented the existence of restorative structures. However, it provided limited analysis of how students experienced these interventions or of whether they genuinely promoted moral reflection rather than mere compliance with adult directives. Furthermore, the consistency of rule enforcement across all teachers and situations, while promoting institutional coherence, raises questions about whether individual teachers retain sufficient autonomy to adapt responses to specific contexts and student needs.

Integration with Previous Research

The findings from SDN 011 Sorek 1 both confirm and extend previous research on principal leadership in character education. The principal's approach demonstrates transformational leadership, incorporating cultural, humanistic, and national values to foster a supportive school environment (Effendi, 2020). The emphasis on personal behavioral modeling exemplifies the pedagogical leadership concept, in which positive leader behaviors become determining factors in shaping character across the school community (Yusaini, 2020). Furthermore, the principal's ability to balance the instructional, managerial, and emotional aspects reflects the democratic, paternalistic, and transformational leadership styles, which have been found to influence student character formation (Mbua, 2023) significantly. The comprehensive strategy integration combining modeling, training, habituation, partnerships, and restorative practices represents a practical synthesis of the theoretical frameworks that previous research primarily addressed separately.

However, this study addresses critical gaps in existing scholarship by documenting specific implementation strategies rather than merely describing general leadership competencies or theoretical frameworks. While previous research emphasized that principal leadership plays a central role in character education, few studies have provided detailed accounts of how principals navigate practical challenges, such as insufficient student discipline, low accountability, and personality differences, in real school contexts with specific socio-cultural characteristics. The findings reveal that effective character education requires far more than administrative directives or curriculum mandates. It demands sustained personal commitment from school leaders, systematic teacher capacity building, strategic environmental design through routines and partnerships, and coherent systems that reinforce character values across multiple contexts. This comprehensive approach addresses the implementation challenges that previous research identified as limiting the effectiveness of character education but rarely examined in depth.

The practical implications of this study show that strengthening character education requires principals to model visible, consistent behaviors that reflect the values they wish to cultivate. The case of SDN 011 Sorek 1 illustrates that authentic daily modeling encourages voluntary imitation from teachers and students more effectively than formal rules or training alone. Even so, sustainable character education depends on distributing leadership responsibilities through teacher training, collaborative planning, and integration of character values into institutional documents such as vision statements, lesson plan formats, and assessment guidelines. Effective implementation also requires a combination of direct strategies such as modeling, habituation, and partnerships, along with indirect approaches including clear rules, consistent supervision, and restorative consequences. These strategies become more impactful when integrated, supported by active collaboration with families and community partners, and strengthened through clear communication about shared goals and inclusive participation opportunities.

Policy and training implications emphasize the need for professional development that equips principals and teachers with the conceptual and practical skills required for character education. Policymakers must provide schools with flexibility to adapt programs to local cultural contexts, as demonstrated by the

religious integration at SDN 011 Sorek 1, while avoiding uniform mandates that overlook contextual diversity. Accountability systems should shift from document compliance toward evaluating genuine implementation quality through observations, student reflections, and stakeholder feedback. Teacher preparation programs also need to embed character education across coursework and field experiences so that prospective teachers can practice facilitating moral discussions, modeling ethical behavior, and implementing restorative approaches. Although this study provides valuable insights, its limited duration, single-site focus, and reliance on behavioral observation without systematic character assessment reduce its generalizability. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs, incorporate diverse assessment tools, explore variations across student subgroups, and include student perspectives to understand better internal value formation, contextual influences, and potential unintended consequences of character education initiatives.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that character education at SDN 011 Sorek 1 was implemented through a comprehensive, integrated set of strategies, in which the principal played a central role by combining exemplary modeling, teacher training, habituation, competition, community partnerships, curriculum integration, and restorative practices into a coherent school culture. The findings indicate that effective character formation requires consistent leadership commitment, structural support, and contextual adaptation to cultural values and community conditions. Furthermore, the study reveals that the success of character education cannot rely solely on the principal's personal influence; instead, it must be sustained through distributed responsibility involving teacher collaboration, parental engagement, and active student participation. In addition, this research contributes academically by documenting implementation strategies in detail, highlighting practical challenges often overlooked in theoretical models, and demonstrating the potential effectiveness of well-integrated approaches in shaping student character.

The research answers the formulated questions by showing that the principal employed a variety of strategies to cultivate discipline, responsibility, honesty, and respect among students, including behavioral modeling, motivation and guidance, routine habituation, positive reinforcement, and the integration of character values into learning activities. It also identifies key obstacles such as low student discipline, weak responsibility in managing loaned books, and limited awareness of maintaining classroom cleanliness. Through adaptive leadership, the principal addressed these challenges by adopting more personalized approaches, strengthening communication, involving teachers and parents, and developing engaging, meaningful character-learning methods. Thus, the research objectives were achieved by describing the principal's concrete strategies, identifying implementation barriers, and explaining the solutions developed to enhance the effectiveness of character education. Building on these findings, future research should employ longitudinal designs with multiple assessment methods to examine lasting character development, investigate implementation across diverse school contexts, analyze variations across student subgroups, incorporate substantial student voice, and critically examine both intended and unintended consequences of character education approaches so that schools can more effectively prepare students to become responsible and ethical citizens.

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