



Transformative School Leadership in Integrating Character Values through Ethno-Social Pedagogical Practices at Imelda Health Vocational School Medan

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study investigates how transformative school leadership integrates character values into the school culture of Imelda Health Vocational School Medan through ethno-social pedagogical practices. The main objective is to analyze the principal's leadership model and its contribution to strengthening character formation grounded in the school's socio-cultural context. The study is based on the premise that school leadership extends beyond administrative duties toward shaping a value-oriented educational ecosystem.

Methodology: A qualitative design was employed using in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. Data were processed through Miles and Huberman's interactive analysis model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

Main Findings: The findings reveal two interconnected dimensions of leadership practice. First, the managerial dimension includes policy development, standard operating procedures, human resource capacity-building, the teaching factory curriculum, and evaluation systems that embed character-oriented principles. Second, the cultural and ethical dimension is demonstrated through the leader's moral exemplarity, consistent ethical conduct, and humanistic disciplinary narratives. Together, these practices cultivate a shared cultural habitus that reinforces character development and strengthens the school's socio-pedagogical environment.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This study proposes an integrative framework of transformative leadership that blends managerial system design with socio-cultural character formation. The model contributes to character education policy and implementation by demonstrating how socio-cultural values can shape school culture and guide value-based decision-making. It adds to contemporary scholarship by linking transformative leadership, character formation, and ethno-social pedagogy within vocational education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The development of education in the twenty-first century increasingly emphasizes the importance of social, moral, and character values as integral components of school effectiveness [1]. International scholarship highlights that values-based leadership plays a crucial role in shaping ethical behavior, collective identity, and long-term school improvement, particularly through the principal's ability to articulate shared values and translate

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them into everyday practices [2]. Researchers such as Fullan, Schein, and Shields argue that school leaders are not only organizational managers but also moral agents whose leadership influences [3], [4]. the formation of school culture and students' socio-emotional development [5]. This broader understanding reinforces the strategic role of the principal in determining the direction, character, and moral framework of an educational institution [6].

Educational leadership generally encompasses two main dimensions: managerial competence and moral-spiritual exemplarity [7]. As managers, principals must effectively coordinate human resources, formulate policies, and shape pedagogical environments that support quality learning [8], [9]. At the same time, they are expected to function as ethical role models who demonstrate integrity, compassion, responsibility, and other core moral values that help inspire the school community [10]. This dual role becomes increasingly important in an era of global pressures and moral challenges, where schools are expected not only to produce academically competent graduates [11], but also individuals with strong moral and social integrity [12].

School culture is widely recognized as a system of norms, values, traditions, and shared practices that reflect the identity of the institution and influence the behavior of its members [13]. International studies emphasize that a strong and coherent school culture significantly shapes student character formation, commitment, and academic engagement [14]. Principals therefore play an essential role in constructing a healthy, value-oriented school culture through visionary, consistent, and participatory leadership [15]. In Islamic educational contexts, values such as honesty, discipline, responsibility, hard work, and compassion constitute foundational ethical elements that must be internalized within both teaching activities and daily school routines [16], [17]. These values strengthen character formation [18], while also supporting the professional work ethic required in vocational education settings [19].

Vocational schools carry an additional responsibility to harmonize technical competencies with strong moral foundations, particularly through practice-based learning models such as teaching factories [20]. In this context, Islamic values provide a moral compass that guides students in applying skills responsibly, ethically, and in alignment with industry expectations. The Islamic leadership tradition underscores democratic, participatory, and exemplary practices, where decision-making is based on consultation, shared responsibility, and moral consistency [21], [22]. When practiced effectively, this leadership style fosters an inclusive and humanistic school culture, sustaining the collective observance of religious practices such as congregational prayers, devotional readings, and Friday sermon [23]-[25].

In the socio-cultural context of Medan, Islamic values are not only religious principles but also part of the broader ethno-social identity of local communities. These values shape everyday social interactions, communal expectations, and cultural norms, making them integral to the character education practices adopted by schools. For vocational institutions, aligning character education with local socio-cultural values enhances cultural relevance, fosters community engagement, and strengthens the contextual grounding of value-based educational practices.

Although previous studies recognize the importance of the principal's leadership role, much of the existing literature remains centered on administrative leadership and general school culture development [26], [27]. There is a notable research gap concerning the integration of Islamic values into school culture [28], particularly in vocational schools that face the dual mandate of developing both professional competence and ethical character [29]. Additionally, international literature on values-based leadership rarely contextualizes leadership through an ethno-social lens within Islamic vocational education environments. Given this gap, the present study is both urgent and necessary. It examines how transformative Islamic leadership is enacted through managerial functions, spiritual exemplarity, and the cultivation of school culture at Imelda Health Vocational School Medan. The central research question guiding this investigation is: How does the principal's leadership model integrate Islamic values into the school culture at Imelda Health Vocational School Medan?

This study offers several layers of contribution. Theoretically, it extends the discourse on values-based leadership by presenting an ethno-social Islamic perspective that demonstrates how faith-rooted ethical principles can shape school culture in vocational settings. Practically, the study provides insights for principals and education policymakers seeking to develop leadership strategies that harmonize professional standards with value-based character formation. The integrative findings have implications for designing vocational school policies that embed socio-cultural values within teaching, assessment, student discipline, and community partnership models. The novelty of this research lies in its articulation of an integrative framework that merges transformative leadership, character education, and ethno-social pedagogy within an Islamic socio-cultural environment, offering a timely model for strengthening moral and professional competencies in contemporary vocational schools.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design, which is considered appropriate for exploring the complexities of school leadership and the integration of Islamic values within school culture [30], [31]. Qualitative inquiry allows researchers to interpret social phenomena in their natural settings and to understand participants' lived experiences in depth [32]. The key informants included the principal, teachers, students, and members of the

school committee who were selected purposively to provide diverse perspectives on leadership practices, cultural routines, and the integration of Islamic-based socio-cultural values. Interviews captured stakeholders' interpretations of leadership decisions and value-internalization mechanisms, while participatory observations focused on daily school activities such as religious practices, teaching factory implementation, disciplinary routines, and interpersonal interactions. Documentation, including school policies, strategic plans, activity records, and disciplinary reports, was analyzed to triangulate verbal and observational findings. Data analysis applied Miles and Huberman's interactive model involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing [33], complemented by thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's framework to identify recurrent patterns related to leadership behavior, value internalization, and cultural formation [34]. To ensure data validity, this study employed methodological and source triangulation and conducted member checking to confirm the credibility of emerging themes [35], [36]. Research procedures followed a systematic sequence beginning with the identification of the research focus, obtaining institutional permission, conducting an initial site orientation, and implementing simultaneous data collection throughout interviews, observations, and documentation. Each cycle of data collection was followed by transcription, coding, and iterative analysis, which informed subsequent field visits until conceptual saturation was reached, followed by member checking, synthesis of themes, and formulation of the final leadership model. The overall research process can be summarized as a sequential flow beginning with the identification of the research focus, followed by obtaining ethical clearance and formal permission from the institution. After approval was granted, the researcher entered the site and conducted an initial orientation to understand the school environment. Data collection was then carried out through interviews, observations, and documentation. All collected data were subsequently transcribed and coded in their initial form. The next stage involved conducting interactive analysis based on the framework of Miles and Huberman together with thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke. As the analysis progressed, categories and themes were refined iteratively to ensure conceptual clarity. Member checking was performed to verify the accuracy of interpretations with participants. The final stage involved synthesizing the findings to develop a comprehensive understanding of the leadership model and value-integration process. The procedure concluded after the synthesis was completed. This procedural flow ensured that the study captured a comprehensive and credible depiction of how transformative leadership integrates Islamic socio-cultural values into the school culture of Imelda Health Vocational School Medan.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. From Values to Systems: Managerial Architecture as a Mechanism for Integrating Islamic Values at Imelda Health Vocational School Medan

The integration of Islamic values into the school culture at Imelda Health Vocational School Medan is institutionalized through a structured managerial system that transforms values from abstract concepts into operational mechanisms embedded in school governance. The principal plays a central role as the architect who translates the values of honesty, discipline, responsibility, and *ihsan* into concrete policies and procedures. This form of value-based leadership aligns with international scholarship that emphasizes the role of principals as moral agents whose decisions and behaviors significantly influence school culture and student character formation [37], [38]. At this institution, the Islamic value-oriented managerial architecture is documented in the annual work plans, codes of conduct, and standard operating procedures. These documents serve not merely as administrative requirements but as mechanisms to internalize values, such as linking attendance guidelines with the moral responsibility of discipline and integrity, which reflects accountability to the broader school community.

Human resource management at Imelda Health Vocational School further demonstrates how Islamic values permeate institutional processes. Recruitment, professional development, and teacher performance appraisals prioritize moral integrity and religious exemplarity alongside academic and technical competence. Teachers function not only as instructors but also as moral exemplars whose everyday behavior reinforces institutional values. International studies similarly highlight that character-oriented vocational education requires teachers to model ethical behavior consistently so that students can internalize workplace ethics, professionalism, and moral responsibility. In the curriculum, particularly within the teaching factory program, students practice hard work, responsibility, and quality orientation while simultaneously being encouraged to view their tasks as spiritual practices. This aligns technical competencies with Islamic spirituality [39], reflecting global findings that vocational character education is most effective when moral values are embedded into real-life production or service tasks.

The principal also institutionalizes a monitoring and evaluation system that integrates assessments of technical competence with moral indicators. Academic and non-academic evaluations consider not only cognitive performance but also affective-spiritual development. This approach prevents the symbolic or superficial application of values by ensuring that character formation is constantly reviewed. When issues arise, such as students' declining attendance in congregational prayers, the school adopts dialogical rather than punitive

measures. This practice reflects Freire's dialogical pedagogy, in which moral transformation emerges from collective reflection and shared critical consciousness rather than top-down enforcement [40].

Participatory decision-making constitutes another essential dimension of leadership in this school. Teachers, staff, and students actively contribute to policy discussions and decisions related to religious activities, daily routines, and teaching factory arrangements. This participatory culture reflects the Islamic principle of shura and is consistent with findings that collective engagement strengthens institutional cohesion and enhances the implementation of character education policies [40]. Religious activities such as congregational prayers, Quranic recitation, and weekly Yasin readings are integrated into the school timetable as moments of spiritual enrichment rather than administrative obligations. Consistent modeling by school leaders and teachers, seen in punctuality, modest attire, and ethical communication, strengthens the habitual internalization of these values.

The principal also institutionalizes a monitoring and evaluation system that integrates assessments of technical competency with indicators of value internalization. Evaluations of academic and non-academic activities consistently consider both cognitive outcomes and affective-spiritual development. This system mitigates the risk of decoupling, a situation in which values remain symbolic rather than internalized, by ensuring that moral development is continuously monitored. When issues arise, such as decreased attendance at congregational prayers, the school adopts a dialogical approach rather than punitive measures. This strategy reflects Freire's concept of dialogical pedagogy, which emphasizes collective reflection and conscientization as mechanisms for authentic moral and cultural transformation [41].

Participatory decision-making is a core feature of the principal's leadership. Teachers, staff, and students are routinely involved in discussions on policies and religious activity schedules, reflecting the Islamic principle of shura. Such participation strengthens collective ownership and institutional cohesion, consistent with research showing that participatory leadership enhances school culture and improves policy implementation [42]. Religious activities such as congregational prayers, Quranic recitation, and weekly yasinan are integrated into the academic timetable, yet they are positioned as spiritual opportunities rather than administrative obligations. Through consistent modeling by the principal and teachers in punctuality, modest attire, and ethical communication, Islamic values evolve into habitual practices.

Data from interviews provide substantial insights into how the principal enacts integrative leadership. In a July 2025 interview, he emphasized, *"We strive to ensure that every school policy is rooted in Islamic values. For example, when drafting the teaching factory SOP, we did not only talk about production targets, but also discipline, honesty, and trustworthiness. So the children learn not only how to make products, but also how to be responsible."* In August 2025, he added, *"One of our challenges is how to avoid the impression that religious activities are just a formality. To that end, we have created an evaluation system, where teachers report on the development of students' attitudes, not just their academic grades."* In September 2025, he stated, *"We always involve teachers and students in discussions. Important decisions, such as the schedule of religious activities or the division of teaching factory tasks, are always discussed together. That way, everyone feels the same responsibility to maintain Islamic culture."* He later reflected, *"For me, the integration of Islamic values is the core of leadership. If values have become a culture, then the system will run by itself. What matters is that the principal consistently sets an example."*

A distinctive finding of this study is that religious practices at Imelda Health Vocational School are not merely expressions of institutional religiosity but are deeply rooted in the local wisdom of the Medan community. Medan's urban Muslim communities are known for strong traditions of congregational worship, neighborhood-based devotional gatherings, and communal cooperation during religious events. These traditions shape everyday behavior and expectations, and their incorporation into school culture represents an ethno-social adaptation rather than a top-down imposition. Religious activities thus become a continuation of local cultural identity and social cohesion.

The ethno-social pedagogical implications of this leadership model are significant. The leadership fosters social integration by creating shared value-based practices that unite students across ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. This aligns with Banks' multicultural education theory, which argues that shared moral values are essential for building inclusive learning environments [43]. Character strengthening occurs through consistent behavioral modeling, reflecting Bandura's social learning theory that posits students internalize values by observing role models and receiving reinforcement [44]. This leadership model is also culturally grounded, consistent with Freire's assertion that effective pedagogy must reflect learners' cultural realities.

The findings also align with international research on vocational character education. Studies in Germany, Finland, and Japan demonstrate that vocational institutions with strong value integration systems produce graduates with higher ethical decision-making and professional responsibility [45]. Research in Malaysia and Turkey shows that incorporating religious or cultural values into vocational curricula significantly improves students' discipline, teamwork, and workplace ethics [46], [47]. These comparative findings reinforce the relevance of value-based leadership in vocational contexts globally.

This study contributes critically to the development of an ethno-social Islamic leadership framework. Theoretically, it demonstrates how value-based leadership can be operationalized through managerial structures,

curricular practices, and participatory systems. Practically, it offers a model for school leaders seeking to integrate character values into vocational school cultures. Limitations include its single-site focus, qualitative approach without quantitative outcomes, and the lack of external stakeholder perspectives.

3.2. Spiritual Exemplarity as a Social Mechanism for Culture Formation: From Ritual to Habitus

The spiritual exemplarity demonstrated by the principal at Vocational School Imelda Medan functions as a key social mechanism in shaping the school's culture. His exemplary behavior moves beyond symbolic formality and manifests consistently in his daily actions, which are observed and internalized by teachers and students. From active participation in religious activities to maintaining ethical communication, the principal becomes a living model whose behavior signals to the school community how Islamic values should be practiced. Within the sociological framework of education, this form of exemplary behavior aligns with modeling processes in which subordinates interpret and emulate the conduct of their leaders. When the principal attends congregational prayers punctually, students interpret this not merely as ritual participation but as an expression of spiritual responsibility, turning punctuality into a collective moral commitment.

Religious rituals within the school, including daily Quran recitation, weekly yasinan, and Friday lectures, serve as mechanisms of value internalization. What distinguishes the cultural formation at Vocational School Imelda is not simply the consistency of these rituals but the way the principal reframes them as pedagogical opportunities. Rituals thus function as learning processes in which students acquire time management, respect for others, and awareness of their accountability before God. Through these processes, values shift from being externally enforced rules to internally cultivated dispositions. This practice resonates with Freire's notion of value-centered pedagogy that links ritual activities with moral consciousness and social responsibility. Moral narratives also strengthen this process. In teacher meetings and student briefings, the principal consistently reinforces spiritual values, reminding the community that quality work reflects the principle of *ihsan*, honesty embodies *amanah*, and obedience to rules signifies *taat syariat*. These repetitive and meaningful narratives foster internal awareness rather than mere compliance.

The principal's role as a spiritual model is also evident in his approach to disciplinary issues. Rather than relying solely on punitive measures, he adopts a restorative approach that emphasizes reflection and personal growth. Students who violate rules are engaged in dialogue to understand their mistakes, guided toward improvement, and encouraged to reflect on the moral dimensions of their actions. This approach reflects Islamic values of compassion and aligns with contemporary humanistic discipline models that prioritize moral awareness over fear-based compliance. By encouraging reflection, the principal cultivates a sense of responsibility rooted in religious understanding, demonstrating how religiosity can shape ethical behavior in practical school contexts.

The principal's spiritual exemplarity contributes to the creation of a psychologically safe learning environment. Teachers and students feel comfortable expressing their views because the principal consistently demonstrates openness and respect during discussions. This environment fosters a humanistic culture in which religious values guide interactions without becoming rigid dogma. Through daily behavioral modeling, rituals, and narrative reinforcement, normative cohesion develops organically. Teachers remind each other to uphold discipline, students politely correct their peers, and school staff maintain courteous interactions. This collective awareness shows how the principal's behavior spreads through the institution and becomes a social norm.

In the context of habitus, the principal's exemplarity becomes an internal mechanism for shaping dispositions. As Bourdieu argues, habitus is formed through repeated and consistent practices that gradually become part of an individual's identity. At Vocational School Imelda, the principal's insistence on congregational prayer, pre-study supplications, and polite communication fosters a religious-humanistic habitus that guides students in their daily lives. The principal's application of humanistic discipline further facilitates this process. For instance, when a student arrives late, the principal emphasizes the importance of responsibility and asks the student to write a reflection on the meaning of time in Islam. This practice helps students internalize discipline as spiritual awareness rather than external pressure.

The principal's consistent modeling demonstrates how professionalism can coexist with religiosity. Amid the challenges posed by globalization and secular influences, he models that modernity does not necessitate abandoning Islamic values. Through neat dress in accordance with Islamic law, punctuality, and consistent ethical communication, he establishes that Islamic leadership must integrate moral integrity with professional excellence. This integration has significant implications for vocational graduates. Students trained under such leadership develop not only technical skills but also strong Islamic character. Teachers report that students maintain their worship habits outside of school, indicating that the internalization process has long-term effects. The habit of congregational prayer, in particular, fosters collective awareness that extends beyond the school environment.

The principal's interviews further illustrate how spiritual exemplarity guides cultural formation. In July 2025 he stated, *"For me, exemplary behavior is stronger than a thousand instructions. If I ask teachers and students to pray on time, then I must be present in the front row. The children will see it and then imitate it. That's what I maintain every day."* In August 2025 he added, *"I want religious activities at school not to feel like a rigid obligation. So I always convey their meaning. For example, during yasinan, I relate it to the spirit of togetherness."*

Rituals become a means of building a sense of brotherhood, not just reading prayers together." In September 2025 he emphasized, *"Discipline is still important, but it must be accompanied by compassion. If a student is late, I don't immediately get angry. I invite them to reflect on the meaning of time in Islam. That way, the rules are understood as worship, not just punishment."* He concluded with a reflective statement: *"Spiritual exemplarity is not just a symbol. If teachers and principals consistently set an example, then the culture will live on by itself. I believe this is the best way for Vocational School Imelda to produce graduates who are both professional and have noble character."*

These insights are consistent with Bandura's social learning theory, which asserts that individuals acquire behaviors and attitudes through observation and imitation of credible role models. The principal's daily behavior thus serves as an effective cultural transmitter, shaping what students perceive as normal, appropriate, and valuable. At the same time, Banks' multicultural education framework helps explain how shared rituals and moral practices create social cohesion across students of diverse backgrounds, while Freire's pedagogy of values highlights the importance of linking rituals to broader moral purposes. Bourdieu's habitus provides a deeper sociological explanation of how these repeated practices evolve into durable dispositions that structure behavior.

Overall, the principal's spiritual exemplarity at Vocational School Imelda Medan operates as a powerful social mechanism that transforms ritual activities into a religious-humanistic habitus. By integrating modeling, restorative discipline, shared narratives, and meaningful ritual reinterpretation, the principal effectively cultivates an Islamic school culture that is internalized, lived, and transmitted across the school community.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the transformative leadership enacted by the principal of Imelda Health Vocational School Medan plays a pivotal role in integrating Islamic character values into the school culture. The findings reveal that leadership operates through a dual mechanism of managerial architecture and spiritual exemplarity, resulting in a value-based system embedded in policies, routines, and daily interpersonal interactions. Through strategic policy formulation, participatory decision-making, human resource development, and the alignment of curriculum with moral principles, the principal institutionalizes Islamic values that strengthen organizational coherence and character formation within the school community. At the same time, his consistent modeling of religious practice, ethical communication, and restorative discipline functions as a powerful socialization mechanism that transforms religious activities into meaningful cultural habits.

The study further shows that transformative Islamic leadership fosters a humanistic and spiritually grounded school culture that supports both vocational competence and moral integrity. Students internalize values such as honesty, discipline, responsibility, and compassion through daily routines, collective religious practices, and moral narratives communicated by teachers and the principal. These findings align with major theoretical perspectives, including Bandura's social learning theory, Freire's pedagogy of moral consciousness, Bourdieu's concept of habitus, and Banks' multicultural education framework, all of which explain how values become embedded in institutional culture through leadership practices.

Theoretically, this study advances the discourse on value-based educational leadership by presenting an ethno-social Islamic leadership model that illustrates how religious values can be operationalized within vocational education settings. Practically, the findings offer guidance for principals, educators, and policymakers who seek to cultivate school cultures that harmonize technical skills with moral formation. The leadership model developed in this study underscores the importance of integrating managerial systems with ethical role modeling to ensure meaningful and sustainable cultural transformation.

The study also acknowledges several limitations. Its single-site focus limits the transferability of the findings to broader contexts, and the qualitative design does not provide quantitative measurements of character development. Moreover, the perspectives of external stakeholders such as parents, industry partners, and alumni were not included, which may have provided additional insight into the long-term effects of value integration in vocational education.

Based on these limitations, future research is recommended to explore value-based leadership in multiple vocational schools with diverse socio-cultural contexts, employ mixed-methods designs to measure character outcomes more comprehensively, and incorporate the perspectives of parents, employers, and graduates to understand the broader impact of value internalization. Comparative studies across regions or countries could also provide deeper insights into how cultural contexts shape leadership practices and character education in vocational settings.

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