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Leadership Strategies of the Head of the Islamic Boarding School in Shaping the Character of Students

A Case Study at the Salafiyah Darul Abror Islamic Boarding School in Sorong Regency

[1]Mutmainna*, [1]Hartinah, [1]Mohammad Masykur, [1]Muh. Rusdi Rasyid, [1]Fatma Sari
Corresponding Author: * *mutmainnahamir694@gmail.com
[1] State Islamic Institute of Sorong, West Papua, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of shifting moral values among adolescents in the digital age demands a strategic role for Islamic boarding schools in character building, particularly in heterogeneous regions such as Sorong Regency, which faces specific sociocultural challenges. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with data collection techniques including participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentary analysis at the Darul Abror Islamic Boarding School. Key findings indicate that the boarding school director's leadership strategy is implemented through the "asah-asih-asuh" approach, which integrates direct role modeling, persuasive personal guidance, and the enforcement of humane discipline. The contribution of this study lies in strengthening a contextual model of Islamic educational leadership for regions with high levels of diversity in Eastern Indonesia. The implications of this strategy are the creation of a boarding school ecosystem conducive to the internalization of the values of independence and religiosity among students through the figure of the leader as a surrogate parent. A brief discussion in this study highlights that the effectiveness of character building is highly dependent on the balance between managerial authority and the emotional closeness of the kiai. The study's conclusion affirms that adaptive leadership grounded in nurturing, caring, and guiding principles can bridge the differences in students' family backgrounds to foster outstanding character. As a recommendation, pesantren leaders should enhance the pedagogical competencies of dormitory supervisors and strengthen collaboration with

parents to ensure the consistent and sustainable development of students' character.

Keywords
Adaptive Leadership
Boarding School
Students' Character
Sustainable Development

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Introduction

Character education in Indonesia has become an increasingly urgent central issue, particularly amid the growing social challenges faced by the younger generation. Data from the Central Statistics Agency (*Badan Pusat Statistik* or BPS) shows that the divorce rate in Indonesia continues to rise, with 37,306 divorce cases recorded in 2020 [1]. This situation has led to an increase in the number of children growing up in broken families. Such circumstances have implications for the character development of adolescents. A survey conducted by the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection in 2020 revealed that approximately 30% of adolescents in Indonesia are involved in deviant behavior, such as gang fights and drug abuse. This problem is further exacerbated by a lack of parental attention and supervision due to work commitments or internal family issues. Therefore, collaboration between the government, schools, families, and the community is needed to create an environment conducive to strengthening character education so that the younger generation can grow into responsible and ethical individuals.

The role of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in character development has been legally recognized through Law No. 18 of 2019 on Pesantren, which affirms the function of pesantren as institutions for education, da'wah, and community empowerment. Article 3 states that Islamic boarding schools aim to shape individuals who are outstanding, faithful, God-fearing, of noble character, knowledgeable, independent, and possess a moderate attitude in religious life [2]. In line with this, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology has also established 18 national character values within the Character Education Strengthening Program, including religious devotion, honesty, tolerance, discipline, hard work, creativity, independence, democracy, curiosity, national spirit, love for the homeland, appreciation for achievement, communication skills, love for peace, love of reading, environmental awareness, social awareness, and responsibility[3]. These values align with the pesantren education system, which emphasizes the practice of worship, exemplary conduct, and collective life in dormitories that foster discipline and independence.

The Salafiyah Darul Abror Islamic Boarding School in Sorong Regency is one of the Islamic educational institutions that accepts students from diverse social and economic backgrounds. The boarding school functions not only as a religious educational institution but also as a second home that provides moral, spiritual, and emotional guidance for the students[4]. Before entering the boarding school environment, students have already brought with them foundational character traits shaped by their respective family environments, whether in the form of positive or negative habits. Some students are not yet accustomed to living a disciplined, orderly, or consistent life in performing religious practices due to a lack of guidance within their family environments. These habits present a unique challenge for the religious leaders and caregivers in the process of reshaping the students' character to align with the religious values and responsibilities upheld by the pesantren. This phenomenon aligns with the behaviorist theory proposed by John B. Watson, who stated that individual behavior is the result of learning and interaction with the environment[5]. Thus, the pesantren environment plays a strategic role as an agent of behavior formation through the processes of habituation, reinforcement, and modeling.

The success of Islamic boarding schools in fulfilling their character-building function is inseparable from the leadership strategies of the school head or kiai. The school head does not merely act as an institutional administrator but also as a role model, mentor, and moral figure for the students[6]. The leadership strategies implemented include a "lead by example" approach, the internalization of values through daily habits, and a humanistic, personalized approach. This approach emphasizes the avoidance of physical violence and replaces it with value-based leadership, such as the imposition of educational sanctions in the form of additional Quranic study sessions commensurate with the severity of the offense. This strategy aims to build the character of students who are responsible and of noble character through a persuasive and sustainable process. In line with this, research conducted by Kintara states that the "lead by example" approach by religious leaders, with a commitment to accountability and exemplary conduct, enhances educational quality without resorting to violence. This strategy involves the distribution of persuasive tasks and collaborative mentoring, replacing physical sanctions with daily humanistic habits[7].

Several previous studies have discussed the role of pesantren heads' leadership in character education. Hesti Kusuma's research emphasizes the importance of integrating Islamic values into pesantren leadership to foster religious and independent character[7]. Meanwhile, Lailiyah and Widodo demonstrate that madrasah or pesantren heads play a strategic role in building an organizational culture that supports character education through habit-forming programs and the internalization of values. However, the majority of these

studies were conducted in pesantren with students from relatively stable social backgrounds and located in the Java region.

Empirical studies on pesantren leadership strategies in guiding students from families with diverse social backgrounds, particularly in Eastern Indonesia, such as West Papua, remain limited. Yet, students from dysfunctional families or those facing social issues require a holistic, empathetic, and contextual leadership approach. The head of the pesantren serves not only as an institutional leader but also as a parental substitute and a character- builder. This aligns with Bass's transformational leadership theory, in which leaders inspire followers through a shared vision, intellectual stimulation, individual consideration, and idealized influence—approaches highly relevant for students from heterogeneous backgrounds[8]. This approach enables boarding school leaders to build emotional bonds, facilitate cultural adaptation, and transform social challenges into character strengths, as seen in the situational leadership model in boarding schools that emphasizes flexibility toward local contexts.

Based on this gap, this study aims to describe and analyze the leadership strategies of pesantren heads in shaping the character of students from diverse family backgrounds in Sorong Regency. This study employs a qualitative approach with an in-depth focus on the strategies implemented by boarding school principals in addressing the social complexities of students. It is hoped that this study will contribute theoretically to the development of Islamic educational leadership studies and practically serve as a reference for character education management within the boarding school environment.

Literature Review

Several relevant previous studies provide a strong foundation for understanding the dynamics of leadership and character development among students in Islamic boarding schools, although each has its own distinct focus and context. Millatinnafi'ah & Claretta (2024) examined communication strategies at the Sidogiri Islamic Boarding School through five systematic stages: informal research, program planning, implementation via counseling and disciplinary rules, monitoring, and evaluation and reporting. These successfully shaped the character of students to be disciplined, religious, and responsible through interpersonal and coercive approaches, particularly within the Javanese context facing urban challenges[9]. Fikro et al. highlight the leadership style of the kiai at the Manba'ul Hikmah Kebonsari Wonoboyo Temanggung Islamic Boarding School through direct role modeling, personal mentoring, intensive religious instruction, and the enforcement of humanistic discipline, which has proven effective in fostering religious, disciplined, independent, and responsible students through daily interactions and the kiai's role as a surrogate father figure[10]. Taufiqur Rahman emphasizes the multidimensional influence of the kyai's leadership in managing the pesantren,

encompassing spiritual, moral, managerial, and social-community dimensions, where the kyai serves as the institutional leader, spiritual guide, moral exemplar, strategic decision-maker, and community mediator, thereby shaping the character of religious, disciplined, and socially responsible students through consistent exemplary behavior in daily life[11].

Khamid & Hadi analyzed the strategies of dormitory administrators at the Ngalah Pasuruan Islamic Boarding School to foster students' independence through daily routines, motivation, direct supervision, and exemplary behavior, with administrators serving as supervisors, mentors, motivators, and surrogate parents who encourage independence, discipline, and responsibility[12]. Ma'arif et al. (2021) supplemented this with a study on the role of pesantren education at the Riyadlul Qur'an Islamic Boarding School in Malang through an integrated cognitive, affective, and psychomotor process via five stages: planning, habit formation, development, learning, and enforcement of discipline, which instills character holistically[13]. Although these studies provide valuable contributions in revealing communication strategies, leadership styles, multidimensional roles, self-discipline, and educational integration, their distinction from this study lies in a broader and more contextual focus: this study specifically emphasizes the holistic leadership strategies of boarding school principals based on the asah-asih-asuh framework in shaping the character of students from diverse family backgrounds in Sorong Regency, eastern Indonesia, who face unique social, cultural, and geographical challenges distinct from Javanese boarding schools, thus requiring an adaptive, personalized, and contextual leadership approach for optimal results.

Materials and Methods

A. Research Design

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, which is suitable for exploring social phenomena in their natural settings and emphasizes meaning over statistical generalizations. In line with this, John W. Creswell states that the qualitative approach is used to explore and understand the meanings derived from individuals or groups regarding a social issue or human phenomenon[10]. The qualitative approach was chosen to gain a deep understanding of the leadership strategies implemented by the head of the Salafiyah Darul Abror Islamic Boarding School in shaping students' character, particularly those from dysfunctional family backgrounds. Qualitative research allows the researcher to interpret social reality from the participants' perspective and capture the values, meanings, and natural interaction processes occurring within the boarding school environment. In this study, the researcher served as the primary actor in data collection and interpretation. The research was conducted at the Salafiyah Darul Abror Islamic Boarding School in Sorong Regency, West Papua. This location was chosen because it represents an Islamic boarding school that

implements an intensive residential education system, allowing for continuous interaction between students and caregivers, particularly the head of the boarding school.

B. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected using three primary techniques: observation, interviews, and documentation. This aligns with the Miles and Huberman model (data reduction, data presentation, verification of conclusions) to ensure credible and structured interpretation[14]. Observations were conducted through non-participant observation. The researcher directly observed leadership practices, daily activities, and interactions between the boarding school head, teachers, and students without actively participating in those activities. This method allowed the researcher to capture authentic behavioral patterns and character-building practices. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the boarding school head, teachers (ustadz), and selected students. This type of interview provides a clear framework of guiding questions while allowing flexibility to explore emerging themes. The interviews aimed to obtain in-depth information regarding leadership strategies, challenges faced, and students' perceptions of the character-building process. Documentation involves collecting institutional records such as organizational structures, daily activity schedules, disciplinary regulations, student background data, and character-building programs. These documents are used to support and validate findings from observations and interviews[15].

Results

The research results indicate that the head of the Salafiyah Darul Abror Islamic Boarding School implements leadership strategies focused on character development for students through an exemplary approach, habit formation, and the reinforcement of Islamic values in daily life within the boarding school environment. The head of the boarding school not only performs administrative functions as the institution's leader but also serves as a role model who provides direct examples in attitude, behavior, and religious practices. This strategy is realized through various guidance activities such as regular religious study sessions, moral education, discipline enforcement, and the head's active involvement in students' educational activities, ensuring that religious values, discipline, and responsibility are consistently instilled.

In addition to these leadership strategies, this study also found that the process of character development for students faces several challenges related to the diversity of their family backgrounds. Students from various regions have differing social and economic conditions, as well as distinct family upbringing patterns, which influence their attitudes, habits, and levels of discipline when they first enter the boarding school environment. These

differences require adaptive development strategies so that students can adjust to the rules and culture of life at the pesantren.

To address these challenges, the pesantren has implemented several developmental strategies, such as intensive guidance from caregivers and teachers, the enforcement of disciplinary rules, and orientation programs for new students to help them adapt to the pesantren environment. The implementation of these strategies has shown a positive impact on the character development of students, as evidenced by increased discipline in performing religious duties, respectful attitudes toward teachers and caregivers, and the students' ability to follow rules and cooperate in their daily lives within the boarding school environment.

Table 1. Challenges in Student Character Development

No	Type of Challenge	Handling Strategies
1	Differences in students' family backgrounds	Intensive mentoring and guidance by caregivers
2	Lack of discipline among new students	Enforcement of rules and a monitoring system
3	Difficulty adapting to the pesantren culture	Orientation programs and familiarization with religious activities
4	Influence of the external environment	Strengthening of religious activities and supervision

Table 1 shows that character development for students in Islamic boarding schools is not without various challenges stemming from both internal and external factors. Differences in family backgrounds, a lack of established discipline, and difficulties adapting to the boarding school culture pose significant challenges in the development process. Therefore, Islamic boarding schools implement various strategies such as intensive guidance, the enforcement of disciplinary rules, orientation programs, and the strengthening of religious activities to help students adapt to the boarding school environment and develop better character.

Discussions

A. Leadership Strategies Based on Exemplary Conduct

The leadership of the pesantren head plays a crucial role in the process of shaping students' character. In the context of pesantren education, the kiai serves not only as the administrative leader of the institution but also as a moral figure who serves a role model for the students. This exemplary conduct is reflected in attitudes, behavior, and religious practices consistently demonstrated in daily life. Students indirectly emulate the behavior demonstrated by the leaders and caregivers of the pesantren [11]. This indicates that exemplary leadership is an effective strategy in the process of internalizing character values, as students not only receive these values theoretically but also witness their practical application in the daily life of the pesantren. This finding aligns with the view that effective educational leadership does not focus solely on managerial aspects but also on a leader's ability to build an organizational

culture oriented toward values and character[16]. Thus, leadership based on exemplary conduct serves as a crucial foundation for creating an educational environment conducive to the formation of students' character.

B. Incorporating Islamic values into daily life

In addition to the leader's exemplary conduct, the character development of students is also fostered through the process of instilling Islamic values in daily life within the boarding school environment. This institution is realized through various activities such as congregational prayer, regular religious study sessions, religious activities, and social initiatives involving all students. Through these activities, students are trained to apply religious values such as discipline, responsibility, and mutual respect. This habituation process occurs continuously so that these values are gradually instilled in the students and become part of their character [17]. From a character education perspective, habituation is an effective method because it shapes consistent behavioral patterns through the repetition of positive activities [18]. The results of this study also align with findings stating that character education based on religious values can shape students' personalities more comprehensively because it emphasizes not only cognitive aspects but also affective and spiritual aspects [4].

C. The Influence of Family Background on Boarding School Students' Character

Research findings indicate that the diversity of students' family backgrounds is one of the factors influencing the character development process in Islamic boarding schools. Students from various regions have differing social, economic, and family upbringing conditions. These differences influence the students' attitudes, habits, and levels of discipline when they first enter the pesantren environment. Some students from families with suboptimal parenting styles often struggle to adapt to the rules and culture of pesantren life. This indicates that the family environment plays a crucial role in shaping a child's character from an early age. In educational studies, the family is the primary environment that influences an individual's moral and behavioral development. Previous research also indicates that the quality of the example set by parents is closely linked to a child's character development [19]. Therefore, boarding schools need to implement more adaptive and persuasive guidance strategies to help students adapt to their new educational environment.

D. The Role of the Pesantren Environment in the Character Formation Process

The boarding school environment, based on a residential system, provides opportunities for intensive and continuous character development[20]. Interactions among students, teachers, caregivers, and the school director create an educational atmosphere focused not only on knowledge transfer but also on shaping attitudes and behaviors. Within the residential setting, students are trained to live independently, maintain discipline, and take responsibility

for daily activities. This process occurs through consistent supervision, habit formation, and guidance provided by boarding school caregivers. This conducive educational environment enables the internalization of values more effectively than an educational system confined solely to the classroom. This aligns with the concept of character education in the boarding school system, which emphasizes the importance of continuous development through structured daily activities[21]

E. The impact of implementing Islamic values on students' behavior

The implementation of Islamic values in pesantren leadership has proven to have a positive impact on the character development of students [22]. Values such as honesty, responsibility, discipline, and mutual respect are consistently instilled through various educational and mentoring activities within the pesantren environment. The impact of implementing these values is evident in the changes in students' behavior in their daily lives. Students demonstrate increased discipline in performing religious rituals, a respectful attitude toward teachers and caregivers, and concern for others. Additionally, students also demonstrate the ability to cooperate, maintain environmental cleanliness, and comply with the rules in effect at the pesantren. These findings reinforce the view that the integration of religious values into the educational system can make a significant contribution to the sustainable character development of students [23]. Thus, Islamic boarding schools can serve as an effective educational environment in shaping a younger generation that not only possesses religious knowledge but also exhibits strong character in community life.

Conclusion

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the leadership strategies of the head of the Salafiyah Darul Abror Islamic Boarding School in Sorong Regency play a crucial role in the process of shaping students' character. The leadership strategies implemented are oriented toward setting a good example, instilling Islamic values, and fostering discipline through religious activities and daily routines within the boarding school environment. The head of the boarding school not only performs administrative functions as the leader of the institution but also serves as a role model and moral guide who directly influences the behavior and character development of the students. In the character-building process, the head of the boarding school also faces various challenges related to the diversity of the students' family backgrounds. Differences in social and economic conditions, as well as family upbringing, influence the attitudes and habits of students when they first enter the boarding school environment. To address these challenges, the boarding school implements a character-building strategy that is persuasive, educational, and sustainable through intensive guidance by caregivers, the enforcement of disciplinary rules, orientation programs for new students, and the strengthening of religious activities.

The implementation of Islamic values in pesantren leadership has proven to have a positive impact on the character development of students. This is evident in the increased discipline in performing religious duties, respectful attitudes toward teachers, concern for others, and the students' ability to follow rules and live in an orderly manner within the boarding school environment. Thus, leadership by the head of the boarding school—rooted in religious values, exemplary conduct, and consistent guidance—can be a crucial factor in shaping students' character to be noble and responsible members of society.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Authors



Mutmainna is an undergraduate student in the Islamic Education Management Study Program at the Faculty of Tarbiyah, State Islamic Institute of Sorong. She enrolled in 2022 and is actively engaged in academic activities related to Islamic education and educational management. Her interests include character education, pesantren studies, and educational leadership in Islamic institutions. She is committed to developing her academic competence and contributing to educational improvement in Indonesia. (email: mutmainnahamir694@gmail.com).



Dr. Hartinah, S.Pd.I., M.A., serves as the Coordinator of the Islamic Education Management Study Program at the State Islamic Institute of Sorong. She contributes to curriculum development, quality assurance, and institutional governance within higher Islamic education. Her research focuses on integrating spiritual values to strengthen a culture of quality in madrasahs and Islamic educational institutions. She has published several academic works in the field of Islamic educational management and leadership. (email: hartinah@iainsorong.ac.id).



Mohammad Maskur, M.Ed., is a lecturer in the Department of Islamic Education Management, Faculty of Tarbiyah, at State Islamic Institute of Sorong. His academic interests focus on educational supervision, instructional leadership, and the improvement of educational quality in Islamic institutions. He actively participates in teaching, research, and community service activities related to Islamic education management and supervision practices. (email: maskuryusuf250570@gmail.com).



Dr. Muh. Rusdi Rasyid, M.Pd.I. is a lecturer at State Islamic Institute of Sorong and currently serves as Vice Rector II of the institution. He is actively involved in academic administration, institutional development, and higher education management. His academic interests include Islamic education, educational leadership, and policy development in Islamic higher education institutions. Through his professional and academic contributions, he supports the advancement of educational quality and institutional governance. (email: rusdipasca@gmail.com).



Dr. Fatma Sari, M.Pd.I., is a lecturer in the Faculty of Tarbiyah at the State Islamic Institute of Sorong and serves as the First Dean within the faculty. Her research focuses on education, particularly in the areas of Islamic education, teaching development, and educational management. She actively contributes to academic development through teaching, research, and community engagement activities aimed at improving the quality of education. (email: fatmaassidiq@gmail.com).