

From Golden Age to Golden Generation: Leadership in Early Childhood Character Education

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Citation: Cinantya, C., Suriansyah, A., A., A., & N. (2025). From Golden Age to Golden Generation: Leadership in Early Childhood Character Education. *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 10(4), 1264–1272. <https://doi.org/10.64753/jcasc.v10i4.3011>

Published: December 08, 2025

ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe how the principal's leadership develops religious-based character education for early childhood. Using a qualitative approach, the principal explores the principal's experiences and perceptions regarding leadership practices in implementing religious-based character education in the early childhood environment. The subjects of the study were the principal, teachers, and parents at PAUD Al Firdaus, Banjarmasin. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. The validity of the data was tested using triangulation techniques. Data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's analytical model, which includes data condensation, data presentation, and drawing and verifying conclusions. The results show that the principal employs several strategies: (1) establishing religious-based character education as a core vision of the school; (2) socializing the vision, mission, and goals to all school members to achieve common objectives; (3) acting as a role model by consistently displaying good behavior to inspire and motivate the school community; (4) encouraging creativity and innovation among teachers by providing support, discussion opportunities, and appreciation; and (5) addressing the needs of teachers and staff through effective communication, personal mentoring, and offering training tailored to their interests and potential. The study concludes that the principal demonstrates transformational leadership with a collaborative and participatory approach grounded in religious values.

Keywords: Leadership, Character education, Early childhood, Golden generation.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is an era of globalization and digitalization, bringing profound changes to various aspects of life. The key characteristics of this century are accelerated technological development, global connectivity, and the need for new competencies (Susilo et al., 2024). In the context of education, the 21st century emphasizes the 4C skills of critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration as the primary foundation for facing global challenges. However, intellectual intelligence alone is insufficient; it also requires emotional, spiritual, and moral intelligence as a balancing factor. Therefore, the ideal 21st-century society is one that is not only technologically literate and innovative, but also upholds character values, noble morals, and is grounded in spirituality to be competitive while maintaining social harmony (Aslamiah et al., 2021; Suriansyah, 2023; WEF & BCG, 2015).

However, reality shows that 21st-century society still faces various character challenges. Globally, the issue of moral degradation has emerged due to the unlimited flow of information, which has implications for increasing individualism, materialism, and intolerant behaviors (Aji, 2019; Widyaningrum & Dugis, 2018). In Indonesia, international research results, such as the Global Talent Competitiveness Index and UNICEF reports, indicate low socio-emotional skills and a crisis of integrity among some young people. National data also shows an increase in cases of youth violence, deviant behavior, and low social awareness. At the local level, particularly in Banjarmasin

and its surrounding areas, phenomena such as declining social etiquette, children's addiction to gadgets, and weakened learning discipline are beginning to emerge. This indicates a gap between the ideal conditions of 21st-century society and the reality currently faced (Kemenkominfo, 2014).

Based on this, it can be concluded that the fundamental problem facing Indonesia is the low quality of character in society, even from an early age. This phenomenon is evident in the numerous cases of children lacking discipline, manners, social awareness, and low religious observance (Winarti, 2018). Various national education reports state that most young children are more skilled cognitively than in the affective and moral aspects, resulting in an imbalance in personality development. This condition is worrying because early childhood is a golden age that is crucial for future character formation. If moral and religious values are not instilled from an early age, it will be difficult to develop a generation with high integrity, which is needed to face the challenges of the 21st century (Putri et al., 2023; Sistia et al., 2023).

The low morals of Indonesian society, including early childhood, is influenced by various factors. First, the rapid flow of globalization and digitalization exposes children to content that is inconsistent with cultural and religious norms. Second, the lack of supervision and role models from parents and the environment, resulting in children lacking consistent role models. Third, the orientation of education still tends to emphasize cognitive aspects over character development. Fourth, the limited facilities and effective character education programs in schools. These factors prevent moral, spiritual, and social values from developing optimally in children. If this condition is not addressed immediately, future generations could potentially experience even more serious character degradation (S. L. Dewi, 2020; Rusydi, 2019).

The solution offered to address these problems is strengthening religious-based character education, especially from an early age. Religious-based education plays a strategic role in instilling moral, spiritual, and ethical values derived from religious teachings, thereby shaping children with noble character. The urgency of religious-based character education lies in its function as a bulwark against the tide of globalization that tends to erode moral values (Cinantya, Aslamiah, & Suriansyah, 2024; Singh, 2019; Subaidi, 2020). Furthermore, this education strengthens children's affective aspects, fosters religious awareness, and forms good habits through role models and practice. Therefore, religious-based character education is a fundamental solution for producing a 21st-century generation that is not only intelligent but also possesses integrity and morals. This aligns with the vision of Golden Indonesia 2045, which emphasizes the importance of developing superior human resources, namely a generation that is globally competitive while still upholding moral, cultural, and religious values (Sudarma, 2022; Yulianti, 2021). Thus, religious-based character education from an early age is a long-term investment to prepare a strong golden generation of Indonesia, with noble personalities, and ready to fill the nation's civilization in the future (Indriani et al., 2022).

Religious-based character education cannot be effective without proper management. From an educational management and administration perspective, program planning, implementation, evaluation, and control must be carried out systematically. The principle of Total Quality Management emphasizes the importance of the involvement of all parties, from the principal, teachers, education staff, and parents, in achieving sustainable educational quality. The principal's leadership is key in this process, as they act as planners, directors, role models, and motivators. Principals who implement transformational leadership are able to foster collaboration, provide inspiration, and ensure that religious values are truly integrated into all educational activities in early childhood education (Cinantya, Aslamiah, & Suriansyah, 2024; Khalidah et al., 2022; Yusuf et al., 2025).

The growing awareness of the importance of religious-based character education is also evident in South Kalimantan, where schools with a religious approach are becoming a trend and a primary choice for the community. One such school is Al Firdaus Early Childhood Education in Banjarmasin, known as a leading school with a vision of developing intelligent, creative, independent, and noble children based on religious values. This excellence attracted the researchers' attention to delve deeper into how the principal's leadership in managing religious-based character education is implemented at the institution. The purpose of this study is to describe the principal's leadership model in implementing religious-based character education at Al Firdaus Early Childhood Education. The novelty of this research lies in its focus, which combines the perspectives of educational management, religious values, and the needs of 21st-century character development in early childhood, in line with the vision of Golden Indonesia 2045.

METHODS

The research method used is qualitative research. According to Sugiyono (Sugiyono, 2016) qualitative phenomenological research is a type of qualitative research that focuses on examining the meaning of an individual's or group's life experiences regarding a particular phenomenon. The main objective is to deeply understand "what the research subjects experienced, how they interpreted those experiences, and how their

perceptions were formed." (Hadi et al., 2021; Sugiyono, 2016). This study explores the experiences and perceptions of principals and teachers regarding principal leadership in religious-based character education in early childhood education (PAUD). The subjects of this study were principals, teachers, and education personnel at PAUD Al Firdaus, Banjarmasin. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation studies. Data validity was tested using triangulation techniques. Data analysis used Miles & Huberman's analysis techniques consisting of data condensation, data presentation, drawing, and verifying conclusions (Miles et al., 2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the research findings, the principal stated that religious-based character education is highly urgent for early childhood. This aligns with Lickona's (Lickona, 2014) view, which asserts that character education is a planned effort to foster moral, ethical, and virtuous values that will form the foundation of an individual's future behavior. At an early age, children are in a golden age, where the formation of fundamental personality and habits is crucial for their subsequent development (Santrock, 2019).

Religious-based character education not only teaches the cognitive aspects of right and wrong but also instills spiritual and moral values, as well as practical applications in everyday life. This is reinforced by Lickona's (Lickona, 2014) opinion, which states that effective character education must encompass the dimensions of moral knowledge, moral feelings, and moral actions (Hikmasari et al., 2021; Susanti, 2022). Religious values instilled from an early age help children develop noble character, cultivate good behavior, and foster a consistent sense of worship. Thus, religious-based character education serves as a crucial foundation for developing a 21st-century generation that is not only intellectually intelligent but also possesses integrity and noble morals (Halimatussa'diyah et al., 2024; Zainudin, 2023).

The urgency of religious-based character education for early childhood makes it a primary focus in developing the vision and mission of PAUD AL Firdaus: "To shape children's personalities that are intelligent, creative, independent, and well-behaved, grounded in religion, for them to pursue the next level of education." The vision and mission serve not only as applicable rules but also as strategic guidelines for school policies and programs, including the development of religious-based character education. With a clear vision, schools can establish focused and consistent long-term goals, so that educational decisions, lesson plans, and children's personal development activities can be aligned with religious values (Drucker, 2012; Patmawati et al., 2023; Tipurić, 2022).

In the formulation process, the principal involves teachers, educational staff, parent representatives, and the foundation. The involvement of these various parties is important because the school's vision and mission are essentially a shared direction that must be understood, agreed upon, and implemented by the entire school community. According to Mulyasa (Mulyasa, 2011, 2018), participatory formulation of the vision and mission will generate collective commitment and a sense of belonging from all stakeholders. Teachers and educational staff need to be involved because they are the direct implementers who ensure the values of the vision and mission are integrated into learning and daily school activities. Parents act as strategic partners who strengthen the continuity of children's character education at home, while the foundation ensures that the vision and mission align with the institution's core values and the direction of the school's future development (Khoirurrijal, 2023; Octaviana & Silalahi, 2017). This view aligns with Sallis's (Sallis, 2014) theory of Total Quality Management in education, which emphasizes the importance of involving all parties in the planning process to achieve sustainable educational quality. Furthermore, Owens and Valesky (Owens, 2004) in their theory of organizational behavior in education assert that active participation of organizational members in the decision-making process increases a sense of responsibility, loyalty, and commitment to policy implementation. This view aligns with Sergiovanni's (Sergiovanni, T, 2006) idea, which emphasizes that effective educational leadership lies in the principal's ability to build a shared vision that guides the school community toward shared moral and professional goals (Daniel et al., 2024; Fiandi & Ilmi, 2022; Rusda et al., 2025). Thus, a collaboratively formulated school vision and mission will be easier to implement, as each party feels a vital part in achieving shared goals.

Furthermore, the socialization of the school's vision and mission is a strategic step in the directing function as stated by (Fayol, 1949; Terry & Rue, 2014), namely the principal's efforts to ensure that all members of the organization work towards predetermined goals in a coordinated manner. Through activities such as regular meetings, parenting, and poster display in the school environment, the principal carries out a managerial function that is not only informative, but also transformative—building a shared understanding and fostering collective commitment to the direction of school development. In the context of educational management theory, this socialization activity reflects the implementation of the principles of communication and coordination which are key to organizational effectiveness (Gorton et al., 2007; Heller, 1993). Furthermore, from a transformational leadership perspective, as stated by Bass and Avolio (Bass, B. M., & Avolio, 1994), the principal acts as an agent of change who inspires school members to actively participate in realizing a shared vision through motivation and

example. Other research shows that consistent and communicative dissemination of the vision and mission can increase teacher engagement and strengthen the school's organizational culture (Almuajahid et al., 2022; Hafizi; et al., 2025). Similar findings were also presented by Bush & Glover (Bush & Glover, 2014), who emphasized that effective educational leaders use strategic communication to build shared understanding and strengthen organizational cohesion. Therefore, disseminating the vision and mission is not merely an administrative process, but a strategic leadership and management tool for sustainably shaping the direction, identity, and culture of school quality.

Furthermore, from a school-based management perspective, the vision and mission must be understood by all school members because they form the basis for program development, decision-making, and evaluation of educational success. Without a shared understanding, the vision and mission remain merely formal documents devoid of practical significance (Mulyasa, 2011). Within the concept of Total Quality Management (TQM), the involvement and understanding of the vision and mission throughout the school community creates a commitment to quality, a collective commitment to achieving educational quality. This is because TQM emphasizes the importance of all parties' participation in realizing continuous improvement (Arcaro, 1995; R. S. Dewi et al., 2025; Noorkhalis et al., 2023; Sallis, 2014).

Owens & Valesky (2004), in their educational administration theory, state that a school's vision and mission serve as guiding principles that direct organizational behavior. If the vision and mission are fully understood by teachers, educational staff, parents, and the foundation, then every policy and action taken will always align with the school's ultimate goals. Therefore, disseminating the vision and mission is not simply a matter of conveying information, but rather a strategic effort to foster understanding, awareness, and shared commitment to create synergy toward a quality and character-based school (Daniel et al., 2024; Hafizi; et al., 2025; Heenan et al., 2023).

The principal also consistently serves as a role model for all school members by demonstrating high commitment, integrity, and consistent good behavior, thereby serving as a source of inspiration. To implement character education in schools, the role of a principal with strong leadership qualities is crucial. A principal with integrity, commitment, and consistency will serve as a true role model for teachers, education staff, and students. This aligns with the transformational leadership theory proposed by Bass & Avolio (1994), which emphasizes that leaders are able to inspire, motivate, and set a moral example, thus encouraging subordinates to achieve shared goals (Aslamiah & Cinantya, 2024; Berkovich & Hassan, 2023; Samsudin & Azizah, 2021; Yufita & Sihotang, 2020).

Furthermore, according to Lickona (Lickona, 2014), effective character education requires consistent role models, as children more easily imitate actual behavior than simply receive instructions (Hikmasari et al., 2021; Susanti, 2022). In the school context, the principal serves as a moral model for the entire school community. From Sergiovanni's (Sergiovanni, T, 2006) perspective, with the concept of moral leadership, educational leaders must emphasize moral and ethical values in all their policies and actions. The principal's commitment and integrity in implementing religious values will foster a school culture of character (Al Halbusi et al., 2021; Simmie & Sheehan, 2022).

Furthermore, Leithwood & Jantzi (Leithwood et al., 2020) explain that effective leadership in education is directly related to increased teacher motivation and commitment, which in turn contributes to the successful strengthening of students' character education. Thus, the principal's commitment, integrity, and consistency not only serve as role models but are also key factors determining the successful implementation of religion-based character education in schools (Cinantya, Aslamiah, & Novitawati, 2024; Purwanti et al., 2024; Suriansyah et al., 2024; Wulandari et al., 2025).

The principal's concrete leadership practices in supporting religion-based character education at Al Firdaus Early Childhood Education are also reflected in efforts to open discussions, build positive communication, provide appreciation, and encourage teachers to be creative and innovative. The principal regularly holds discussion forums or professional learning communities, which provide a platform for teachers to share experiences, ideas, and learning practices. In each meeting, the principal provides constructive feedback using language that emphasizes positive aspects while also including recommendations for improvement. Furthermore, appreciation for teacher achievements is systematically implemented, including announcements at meetings, awards, and resource support for implementing innovations. In this way, teachers feel valued and motivated to continue developing their creativity. The discussion space becomes not only a forum for brainstorming but also a means of strengthening motivation, collective reflection, and concrete follow-up in the form of learning innovations.

This practice aligns with transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes inspiration, motivation, and individual attention, as well as instructional leadership, which focuses on improving the quality of the learning process (Bass, 1990; Cinantya, Aslamiah, & Suriansyah, 2024; Kuswaeri, 2016). Principals who are able to motivate, appreciate, and support teacher creativity apply the principle of distributed leadership, namely dividing leadership roles to strengthen collaboration and shared responsibility. Several studies have shown that transformational leadership has a significant impact on teacher performance and the success of educational innovation (Marlina et al., 2023; Munawarah et al., 2023; Putriningsih et al., 2023). Meanwhile, other studies confirm that participatory

and instructional leadership fosters a collaborative climate and a culture of sustainable learning in schools (Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, 2020; Sanchez & Watson, 2021). Therefore, the principal's concrete practices of positive communication, appreciation, and facilitation of discussion spaces can be seen as concrete implementations of effective modern leadership theory to support the success of character education programs.

The principal provides systematic attention to the personal needs of teachers and education personnel through active listening practices to address professional challenges, providing targeted training and workshops tailored to their interests and potential, and providing personal mentoring for teachers experiencing difficulties implementing religious-based character education. This leadership intervention is both supportive and instructional. The practice of listening serves as an initial diagnostic step, enabling the principal to identify practical and emotional barriers faced by teachers. Based on this diagnosis, professional interventions can be developed, including relevant training programs, workshops, or coaching, to ensure competency development is targeted and responsive to field needs. This kind of approach not only improves teachers' technical capabilities but also strengthens their self-efficacy and readiness to implement character teaching strategies that are sensitive to religious values and local contexts (Amelia et al., 2025; Blase, J. and Blase, 2001; Cinantya et al., 2025; Wahyuni et al., 2023).

Theoretically, the described pattern of personal attention and mentoring reflects the individualized consideration dimension of transformational leadership theory, where leaders pay attention to the needs and development of each organizational member, provide emotional and professional support, and encourage individual growth through targeted learning. This type of leadership also integrates elements of intellectual stimulation, encouraging teachers to experiment with new pedagogical practices, and inspirational motivation, namely communicating a school vision that places character education as a moral and pedagogical priority. Meta-analytic empirical evidence and cross-national studies indicate that principals' transformational leadership is positively correlated with teacher motivation, professional engagement, and improvements in instructional practices, ultimately impacting school quality (Marlina et al., 2023; Munawarah et al., 2023; Purwanti et al., 2024; Widyastuti et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the principal's active role, combining listening practices, facilitating relevant professional development, and individual mentoring, will provide a combination of emotional support and technical capacity that is essential for creating a school environment conducive to religious-value-based character education. This combination of practices is consistent with research findings on transformational leadership and educational quality management principles, which emphasize the involvement of school personnel and top leadership in building a culture of quality and continuous improvement (Amelia et al., 2019; Aslamiah et al., 2020; Kareem et al., 2023; Suriansyah et al., 2024).

Based on the study results, it can be concluded that the principal at PAUD IT Al Firdaus consistently implements a transformational leadership model with a collaborative and participatory approach through various strategies oriented towards strengthening religious-based character education. The principal establishes religious-based character education as an integral part of the school's vision and socializes the vision, mission, and goals to the entire school community to build a shared understanding, commitment, and direction in achieving educational goals. Furthermore, the principal serves as a moral role model, demonstrating integrity, consistency, and behavior that reflects religious values, thus serving as a source of inspiration for the entire school community. The support and motivation provided to teachers in developing creativity and innovation, coupled with an open attitude to discussion and appreciation for performance, demonstrates a sustainable empowerment effort. Furthermore, attention to the needs of teachers and education personnel is demonstrated through effective communication, personal mentoring, and opportunities to participate in training tailored to individual needs, interests, and potential. The implementation of transformational leadership has been proven to support the realization of holistic, religion-based character education at PAUD IT Al Firdaus, and contributes to the formation of the nation's next generation with excellence, character, and noble morals, in line with the grand vision of Indonesia's Golden Generation 2045.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the principal of PAUD Al Firdaus, Banjarmasin, exhibits a transformational leadership style rooted in religious values, employing a collaborative and participatory approach. His leadership is evidenced by four key strategies: first, establishing religious-based character education as a core vision; second, effectively socializing this vision, mission, and goals to all school residents to foster shared objectives; third, serving as a role model by consistently demonstrating commitment and good conduct to inspire others, while motivating teachers to innovate; and fourth, addressing the needs of teachers and staff through effective communication, personalized mentoring, and opportunities for professional development aligned with their interests and potentials.

The principal's role extends beyond administration, embodying a transformational leadership approach that emphasizes moral and spiritual growth. His ability to act as a moral exemplar, communicate a compelling vision,

and foster a participatory environment cultivates a strong sense of unity and shared purpose among school members. This leadership style encourages mutual respect, active engagement, and a collective commitment to religious values, which are central to the school's educational philosophy.

Ultimately, the principal's religious-based, transformational, and collaborative leadership fosters an environment conducive to character development. By continuously nurturing this culture, he successfully aligns school practices with spiritual principles, thereby building an inclusive, motivated, and morally grounded school community. His leadership provides a model for integrating faith, participation, and moral commitment to achieve educational excellence grounded in religious values.

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