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The Principal's Strategy in Implementing Permendikbud on Strengthening Character Education to Realize School Religious Culture

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Abstract

Character education, as an integral part of national education, faces serious challenges due to the impact of rapid digital technological advancement, which has led to a decline in students' character index, particularly in the aspects of independence and integrity. Religious culture in schools has emerged as a strategic approach to strengthen students' spiritual and moral values. However, its implementation is still constrained by partial technical approaches and limited participation from the school environment and the wider community. This study aims to identify strategies employed by school principals in strengthening character education through religious culture at SMP Negeri 2 Sukodono, Sidoarjo. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentary studies. The findings reveal six key strategies: (a) integration of religious values into the curriculum, (b) modeling and exploration of values, (c) habitual religious practices, (d) collaboration with school committees and parents, (e) infrastructure adjustments, and (f) continuous evaluation. These findings support Dewey's theory of habit formation and successfully address challenges such as student diversity and low parental involvement through inclusive approaches. Overall, the implementation of religious culture not only enhances students' character but also fosters a harmonious school climate, contributing both theoretically and practically to the development of value-based leadership models and character education policies.

Keywords:
character education; principal's strategy; school religious culture

Abstrak

Pendidikan karakter sebagai bagian integral dari pendidikan nasional menghadapi tantangan serius akibat dampak kemajuan teknologi digital yang menyebabkan penurunan indeks karakter siswa, terutama dalam aspek kemandirian dan integritas. Budaya religius di sekolah menjadi strategi penting untuk memperkuat nilai-nilai spiritual dan moral, namun implementasinya masih terkendala oleh pendekatan teknis parsial serta minimnya partisipasi lingkungan sekolah dan masyarakat. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengidentifikasi strategi kepala sekolah dalam penguatan pendidikan karakter melalui budaya religius di SMP Negeri 2 Sukodono, Sidoarjo. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan teknik pengumpulan data melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan studi dokumentasi, penelitian ini menemukan enam strategi utama: (a) integrasi nilai agama

dalam kurikulum, (b) pemodelan dan eksplorasi nilai, (c) pembiasaan kegiatan keagamaan, (d) kolaborasi dengan komite sekolah dan orang tua, (e) penyesuaian infrastruktur, dan (f) evaluasi berkelanjutan. Temuan ini memperkuat teori pembentukan kebiasaan menurut Dewey dan berhasil mengatasi kendala seperti keragaman latar belakang siswa dan rendahnya partisipasi orang tua melalui pendekatan inklusif. Secara keseluruhan, penerapan budaya religius tidak hanya meningkatkan karakter siswa, tetapi juga menciptakan iklim sekolah yang harmonis, serta memberikan kontribusi teoretis dan praktis dalam pengembangan model kepemimpinan dan kebijakan pendidikan karakter.

Kata kunci:
budaya agama sekolah; pendidikan karakter; strategi kepala sekolah

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Introduction

Education functions in forming the character of the nation and advancing the collective intelligence of society. The strategic role of education is to improve the quality of human resources in order to succeed development in all scopes of life, both economic, political, social and cultural. In the midst of challenging globalization, the education system is expected be able to adapt to changing times through adaptive and progressive policies. Therefore, education does not only function as a measture of the quality of the nation, but also as a place for the formation of a whole and clean character. Law Number 20 of 2003 explicitly specifies education as a deliberate and planned process to create an active, participatory, and conducive learning atmosphere, in order to optimally develop the potential of students, both spiritual, intellectual, social, and emotional (Habe & Ahiruddin, 2017)

The cultural elements of a school encompass various aspects of values and beliefs that form the foundation for the behavior of all members of the school community. Values such as honesty, responsibility, hard work, tolerance, and mutual respect are internalized as shared norms. Additionally, school norms and rules are manifested in the form of regulations governing punctuality, neatness in dress, cleanliness, and compliance with school rules. Traditions and routine practices such as flag ceremonies, community service, class duty, celebrations of important days, and extracurricular activities strengthen the school's institutional identity and character (Ayu et al., 2024). School culture is also reflected in the use of symbols and distinctive language, including school jargon that represents the values held in high regard. Equally important, a clean and comfortable physical and social environment, along with social interaction patterns that emphasize respect, collaboration, and solidarity, contribute to an educational climate that supports the growth of students' character.

School culture plays a strategic role in instilling holistic character education. The Indonesian Dictionary defines character education as the process of shaping the behavior of individuals or groups through education and training to realize noble values. In this context, education is not only understood as the transfer of knowledge but also as a comprehensive approach that encompasses moral, social, and spiritual dimensions. The characterization of students is a fundamental element in a structured education system to instill values such as integrity, responsibility, and personality (Setiawati & Yogyakarta, 2021). Although various efforts to improve the quality of

character education have been intensively carried out, the reality on the ground shows that there are still many challenges, especially during transitional periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which have impacted the effectiveness of implementation.

The impact of declining student character is evident in various aspects of life, both individual and social. According to national media reports, the increase in juvenile delinquency and crime among students indicates a weak moral foundation that could lead to an ethical crisis (Rosanti, 2023). This phenomenon is exacerbated by the influence of globalization and technological advances that accelerate the spread of foreign cultures and increase dependence on gadgets. As a result, students tend to become more individualistic and less concerned about their social environment. The 2021 National Character Survey shows a significant decline in students' independence and integrity, reflecting a gap between character education policies and their implementation in the field. This condition emphasizes the urgency of optimizing school culture, especially that based on religious values, as a strategic and sustainable means of shaping students' character holistically (Nisa & D, 2023).

Despite the encouraging progress demonstrated in a number of schools with regard to the implementation of religious-based character education, the challenges inherent in its implementation persist. As demonstrated in the data set provided by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2021, there was a continued decline in student character during the period of the pandemic. This phenomenon was attributable not only to technical factors, such as the paucity of facilities, but also to the limited role of the school environment in instilling character values (Loloagin et al., 2023) Consequently, the enhancement of religious culture within educational institutions cannot be regarded as a mere adjunct; rather, it should be conceptualised as a pivotal strategy in the formation of students who embody strong integrity and spirituality.

In this context, schools are expected to internalize religious values as the main foundation of student character building. The government, through various policies, has continuously encouraged the integration of religious values in school life as part of strengthening character education. However, the reality in practice shows that the implementation of religious culture in schools is still not optimal. One of the main causes is that religious culture programs generally originate from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, while many public schools fall under the auspices of the Education Office, creating a policy gap and inconsistency in implementation. Based on the principles of national education, religious culture in schools should be carried out consistently and systematically. Yet, internal barriers such as limited resources, institutional regulations, and the background of religious teachers many of whom do not come from religious institutions remain significant challenges(Tohri et al., 2024).

Facing these challenges, the role of the school principal becomes highly strategic. Principals are required to formulate and implement adaptive and contextual strategies that integrate religious values into the school's daily culture. This responsibility is not merely administrative but transformational, as the principal functions as an agent of change who mobilizes the collective commitment of teachers, staff, parents, and students to realize a religiously oriented learning environment. In line with this, the Decree of the Director General of Teachers and Education Personnel emphasizes the importance of four key competencies for principals: personality, social, managerial, and professional. These competencies form the foundation for value-oriented leadership, which ensures that character education is not merely a slogan but a tangible practice that shapes the holistic development of students (Shula et al., 2022).

Although research on the importance of educational character and principal leadership has been widely conducted, research that specifically highlights the principal's strategy in optimizing religious culture in secondary school environments is still relatively limited. For example, research conducted (Hairi et al., 2024) which

states that the principal's strategy plays a very important role in strengthening character education,(Arif, 2020) discusses the principal's strategy in This study focuses more on the steps taken by the principal to create a religious culture (Maru'ao, 2023) focuses more on revealing the strategies used including communication (meetings and discussions) in implementing religious programs to have an impact on students only. This literature gap is a gap that needs to be answered through contextual and applicable scientific research.

Therefore, this study was conducted to answer this need, with a focus on two junior high schools in Sidoarjo Regency, East Java: SMP Negeri 2 Sukodono and SMP Sepuluh Nopember. Researchers conducted initial observations and interviews with supervisors and principals from several institutions that have implemented school religious culture. From the initial findings, two schools were selected as the object of in-depth study.

This study was conducted to address this need, focusing on two junior high schools in Sidoarjo Regency, East Java, namely SMP Negeri 2 Sukodono and SMP Sepuluh Nopember. The researchers conducted preliminary observations and interviews with supervisors and principals from several institutions that had implemented a religious culture in schools. Based on these preliminary findings, two schools were selected as the subjects of an in-depth study.

John Dewey's habit formation theory was used as the main theoretical framework in this study. Dewey argued that character is formed through repeated and meaningful experiences, so that habits become the foundation for shaping an individual's moral behavior (Dewey, 2024). This theory is used to analyze strategies for developing a religious culture in schools, such as the integration of religious values into the curriculum, the habit formation of daily religious activities, and the consistent role modeling provided by teachers and principals. Despite challenges, such as the diverse backgrounds of students and low parental participation, schools are able to overcome them through an inclusive approach by involving religious leaders and strengthening communication with parents (Dewey, 2024).The results of the study show that the implementation of religious culture not only improves student character, such as integrity and independence, but also creates a harmonious and tolerant school climate. Furthermore, this study provides a theoretical contribution to the development of a religious values-based transformational leadership model, as well as practical recommendations for character education policies at the school level.

The urgency of this research lies in the pressing need to strengthen character education amid globalization, modernization, and complex socio-cultural changes. Schools as formal educational institutions not only function as places for knowledge transfer, but also as arenas for shaping the character, morals, and spirituality of students. In this context, religious culture is present as a strategic instrument that can strengthen the values of integrity, discipline, independence, and tolerance, thereby enabling schools to respond to the challenges of Indonesia's diverse society.

Furthermore, this study emphasizes the importance of the principal's role as a strategic leader who not only manages the learning system but also internalizes moral and religious values in their leadership vision. The value-based transformational leadership model proposed in this study is expected to provide a new direction for the development of educational leadership theory while presenting practical strategies that can be effectively implemented in schools.

Methods

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach that aims to provide a detailed description of the principal's strategy in optimizing religious culture in the school environment. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003) in Coe, Warring, and

Hedges (2025), the qualitative approach seeks to understand the world from the perspective of the research subject through in-depth and contextual data collection. This is in line with Degdo's opinion (2024) which states that qualitative research is a systematic approach to exploring and understanding phenomena in depth, emphasizing extensive explanations and interpretations of the situation being studied. Thus, this approach not only tries to answer what happened, but also how and why the phenomenon occurred.

Furthermore, the qualitative approach allows researchers to explore individual experiences and perspectives in detail, so as to describe the social dynamics and subjective meanings contained in the process of implementing religious culture in schools (Degdo et al., 2024). In line with the views of (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), this method is relevant when researchers want to understand the meaning, process, and social interaction as a whole and contextually from the participants point of view. Therefore, this approach is considered the most appropriate to answer the research focus, namely the principal's strategy in building and strengthening a religious culture in two junior high schools in Sidoarjo Regency, East Java.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted with the principal, vice principal, teachers, and student representatives as key informants who are directly involved in the implementation of religious culture at school. Participatory observation was conducted in routine religious activities and other school activities that reflect religious values. Meanwhile, documentation was obtained from school policy guidelines, religious activity schedules, and visual documentation such as photos of religious activities. The combination of these three techniques aims to minimize dependence on one data source and increase the validity of the findings through triangulation techniques.

The selection of informants was done using purposive sampling technique, which is the determination of informants based on certain considerations that are relevant to the research focus. According the model of Miles and Huberman (Dull & Reinhardt, 2014), informants were selected because they have in-depth and reliable information related to the practice of religious culture in schools. In this study, two schools were selected as research sites, namely SMP Negeri 2 Sukodono and SMP Sepuluh Nopember, based on the schools' reputation in developing a religious culture in the eyes of the surrounding community. Five main informants were identified, consisting of the school principal, religious education teachers, and students active in religious activities. Data analysis was conducted interactively and simultaneously since the data collection process took place. The analysis process included three stages according to (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014)data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing or verification. The collected data were then categorized into several main subthemes, such as leadership strategies, implementation of religious culture, challenges faced, and support from stakeholders. This stage helped researchers identify key issues related to the practice of School Religious Culture at the school level.

To maintain the validity and objectivity of the data, researchers used source triangulation, method triangulation, and member check. Source triangulation was done by comparing information from principals, teachers, and students. Triangulation of methods was done by matching the results of interviews, observations, and documnentation. Meanwhile, member check was conducted by

confirming the research f indings with the informants to ensure the suitability of data interpretation with their experiences. This step is inmportant to ensure that the research results truly reflect the reality that occurs in the field.

Result and Discussion

Based on the results of the study, it was found that school principals play a central role in the implementation of Permendikbud Number 20 of 2018 concerning Strengthening Character Education (PPK), particularly in creating a religious culture in the school environment, known as School Religious Culture (SRC). In the view of school principals, PPK is not merely an additional program or administrative formality, but an integral part of the national education vision that emphasizes a balance between intellectual intelligence and the formation of spiritual and emotional character. This policy is implemented by school principals through systematic and measurable strategies, so that every step is directed towards building an authentic religious culture in schools. Such an approach aligns with the view that character education should not stop at abstract moral teaching, but must be grounded in real practices that shape students' habits and values in their everyday contexts (Hidayati & Rodiyah, 2024).

The Principal's Strategy in Internalizing Religious Activities in School Programs

The journey begins by crafting a compelling vision, mission, and long-term goals anchored in religious character then moving from those guiding stars into concrete strategic objectives that infuse daily life. The principal not only frames norms but also equips the school with multiple strategy options, ready to pivot as challenges emerge for instance, addressing inadequate facilities through partnerships with parents, committees, or external institutions. Research affirms that principals who prepare flexible, well planned strategies and engage all stakeholders teachers, staff, parents, and the wider community find much stronger support and higher chances of success (Retnasari et al., 2023). In contexts where resource constraints loom, collaboration becomes a vital alternative strategy, ensuring that the cultivation of religious values does not stall due to limited infrastructure.

This process continues with the formulation of a vision, mission, and long-term goals that are specifically oriented toward strengthening religious character. Such vision is translated into operational strategic objectives so that it can be realized in the school's daily activities (Keefe, 2021). Effective principals do not rely merely on normative formulations; rather, they anticipate obstacles and prepare alternative strategies that can be adapted to the needs of the moment (Yusuf et al., 2024). For example, when limited facilities threaten the sustainability of religious activities, collaboration with the school committee, parents, or external institutions becomes a realistic solution. At the same time, the aspect of strategy determination by the principal cannot be separated from a comprehensive situation analysis process. This requires a careful assessment of both internal and external conditions: internally, principals examine teacher competence, the adequacy of facilities, and the level of religious understanding among the school community; externally, they consider community support, government policies, and the socio-cultural background of students. Such analysis becomes the foundation for designing a strategic direction that is contextual, realistic, and applicable to the actual conditions of the school by (Murni et al., 2024) at SDN 8 Syamtalira Aron shows that successful Islamic

character education strategies always begin with the formulation of objectives based on the school's internal and external conditions, which are well mapped out.

The next step is to formulate a vision, mission, and long-term goals oriented towards strengthening religious character. This vision is then translated into more operational strategic objectives so that it can be implemented in daily activities. The principal does not only rely on normative formulations, but also prepares alternative strategies that can be selected according to the needs and obstacles that arise in practice. For example, if limited facilities are an obstacle, then an alternative strategy that can be taken is to collaborate with the school committee, parents, or external institutions to meet religious needs. Research by (Dowansiba & Hermanto, 2022) on the strategies of high school principals in preparing driving schools proves that determining effective strategies always involves a thorough planning process, the provision of alternatives, and the selection of the most feasible strategies for implementation. Stakeholder participation is also an important element in determining the principal's strategy. Strategies formulated without involving teachers, educational staff, parents, and the community tend to lack strong support. Principals realize that the success of religious culture in schools depends on the synergy of all parties. Therefore, in determining strategies, the principal always opens up space for participation, whether through meeting forums, committee deliberations, or informal meetings with the community.

Another equally important aspect is determining priorities and allocating resources. Principals cannot implement all programs at once, so priorities must be selected based on urgency and impact on the formation of religious culture. In many cases, principals choose to prioritize strengthening teacher competence through training on integrating religious values into learning, because teachers are the spearhead who interact directly with students. By increasing teacher capacity, religious values can be internalized into various subjects, not limited to Islamic Religious Education. Another priority is usually directed at providing facilities that support religious activities, although budget constraints are often an obstacle. To overcome this, principals utilize CSR programs or collaborate with non-governmental organizations, as revealed in a study on community-based religious school management in several regions (Nasir et al., 2020).

Operational planning is also an integral part of the principal's strategy. Once the strategy has been decided, the principal formulates implementation steps, including who is responsible, what indicators of success will be used, and when the activities will be carried out. For example, the activity of practicing congregational prayer is not only scheduled every day, but also equipped with an evaluation system for attendance, teacher involvement, and monitoring of students' spiritual attitudes. With detailed planning, the determined strategy does not stop at the conceptual level, but is actually realized in practice. This planning approach resonates with the findings of (Susanto, 2022) who emphasized that effective learning strategies must be contextual, measurable, and aligned with students' holistic competencies so that outcomes are not merely theoretical but can be operationalized within school routines

In addition, the aspects of evaluation and follow-up determine the success of the formulated strategy. The principal conducts continuous evaluations by involving teachers, students, and even parents. The evaluation not only assesses the achievement of quantitative targets, such as the number of students participating in

the tahfiz program, but also qualitative impacts, such as changes in students' attitudes, discipline, and religious habits. When obstacles are encountered, the strategy is updated to better suit the needs. This continuous evaluation shows that the principal's strategy is dynamic, adaptive, and constantly evolving in line with the times and changing school needs. As highlighted by (Susanto, 2022) adaptive strategies supported by systematic evaluation are essential to ensure that education not only builds cognitive achievement but also strengthens affective and psychomotor dimensions, thus nurturing students' holistic development

Consistency and sustainability cannot be ignored either. The principal ensures that the strategies that have been determined are not only implemented at certain times but are continuously maintained until they become an ingrained culture. A religious culture will only be formed if all programs are implemented consistently and not sporadically. Thus, religious activities such as communal prayers, congregational prayers, and the habit of greeting others are not treated as mere ceremonial activities, but as part of the daily life of the school community.

Furthermore, the principal's strategy also requires contextual innovation. The principal strives to package religious programs in a form that is relevant to the interests of the younger generation. For example, organizing Islamic art competitions, religious podcasts, or utilizing school social media to spread religious messages. This innovation makes the strategy more attractive to students, while also expanding the reach of religious value internalization. In this context, the principal's transformational leadership is key, as this leadership style can inspire, motivate, and build a shared commitment among teachers and students to realize the school's religious culture (Hartini et al., 2025).

Therefore, the principal's strategy in realizing a religious culture is not merely technical in nature, but rather the result of a reflective, participatory, and innovative process. The principal acts as a transformational leader who is able to mobilize all elements of the school to work together in internalizing religious values, while adapting strategies to the times and local needs. This strategy ultimately makes religious culture not just a slogan, but a collective identity of the school that lives in the minds, attitudes, and behaviors of all its members.

Table 1. Responding to Challenges and Formulating Solutions in Efforts to Realize a Religious Culture in Schools

No	Strategy implementation	Challenge	Solution
1	Integration of Religious Values in the Curriculum	• Teachers' lack of understanding on how to integrate religious values in a transdisciplinary manner. • Lack of examples of successful learning practices (best practices) for teachers to reference. • There is an assumption that religious education is only the responsibility of PAI (Islamic Religious Education) teachers, not	• Organizing training and workshops on religious character-based curriculum development. • Develop interdisciplinary teaching modules that show how religious values can be integrated into all subjects. • Appreciate learning innovations that successfully implement religious value integration.

		the entire school community.	
2	Modeling and Exemplification	• Inconsistency in the behavior of teachers or staff in displaying religious exemplars. • Lack of awareness that teachers and principals are behavioral models for students. • Differences in belief backgrounds and religious levels among educators.	• Establish a code of ethics for religious behavior that is agreed upon by all school members. • Conduct periodic evaluations of the attitudes and behaviors of teachers and staff in the context of role modeling. • Provide regular spiritual guidance to teachers and staff through the teacher tarbiyah program.
3	Habituation of Religious Activities	• Low student participation in religious activities because it is considered a formal obligation. • Limited time and facilities to organize regular religious activities. • Resistance from students or parents to certain religious programs.	• Design religious activities that are flexible and relevant to the interests of the younger generation. • Packaging religious activities in creative forms such as online seminars, Islamic podcasts, or religious art creation competitions. • Provide a space for dialogue between students, teachers, and parents to build an understanding of the importance of religious habituation.
4	Collaboration with School Committee and Parents	• The lack of active role of parents in supporting religious programs at school. • Differences in views between school and family regarding the concept and practice of religious education. • The school committee focuses more on managerial aspects rather than religious character building.	• Establish regular communication forums between schools and parents, such as the Parent School Partnership Forum. • Develop collaborative programs that involve families, such as Family of Faith, Family Tarbiyah, or Parent-Student Learning Day. • Provide educational literacy to parents about the importance of religious character education in child development.
5	Infrastructure Adjustment	• Limited budget to build or revitalize religious facilities such as mosques/mosques, Islamic libraries, or religious zones in the school environment.	• Utilize CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) funds or cooperate with private institutions for the development of religious facilities.

		• Lack of spatial planning that considers religious functions in school building design. • Available facilities are often not optimally utilized due to lack of management.	• Involving architects and education experts in the physical planning process of the school that is spiritually oriented. • Form a mushola/religious facility management team consisting of teachers, students and religious leaders to maintain its sustainability.
6	Continuous Evaluation	• Lack of valid and reliable assessment instruments to measure the development of students' religious attitudes. • The focus of evaluation is more on the academic aspect rather than the affective aspect. • Lack of longitudinal data to assess the long-term impact of the religious culture program.	• Develop authentic religious attitude assessment instruments, such as behavioral observation, self-reflection, and peer assessment. • Integrating religious aspects in the monitoring and evaluation system of overall school performance. • Create a digital database to record the development of students' religious behavior on a regular basis and can be tracked long-term.

Sumber: Data Penelitian, 2025

The implementation of the principal's strategies in realizing a religious culture in schools faces various complex and multidimensional challenges, such as the resistance of some school members to cultural change, limited religious facilities, and gaps in understanding of religious values between individuals. However, with a holistic, participatory and sustainable approach, the principal is able to overcome these obstacles through innovative and contextual solutions. This solution approach is realized through participatory dialogue, religious training for teachers, and strengthening communication and collaboration with parents and school committees.

Strengthening Character Education in Building a Religious Culture in Schools

In order to strengthen the implementation of the Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture (Permendikbud) on Strengthening Character Education (PPK), especially to build School Religious Culture, principals play a transformational leadership role that not only focuses on administrative aspects, but also on strengthening the capacity of all school stakeholders. Through careful strategic planning and effective management of supervision and evaluation, religious culture can be used as a comprehensive moral foundation of education, forming a generation that is not only intellectually intelligent, but also faithful, pious and virtuous(Zaini, 2025).

As a form of innovation and a unique approach in facing various challenges, some schools have developed a structured religious mentoring program for students and teachers, formed a spiritual community in the school environment, and

implemented a religious value-based reward system. These innovations not only strengthen the implementation of the Strengthening Character Education (PPK) program, but also become an effective means for internalizing religious character values in the daily lives of all school members. Thus, the effort to build a religious culture is not just a slogan, but is truly realized in the mindset, attitude, and collective identity of the school as a whole.

The implementation of Permendikbud No. 20/2018 through systematic and innovative principal strategies has proven to be the foundation in building an authentic religious culture in schools. This culture is not just a formal symbol, but transforms into a collective character that lives in the daily lives of all school members. The strategies applied by principals in strengthening Character Education are not merely technical steps, but the result of a thoughtful process of formulating, analyzing, and prioritizing actions according to the context of the school (Arifin & Maunah, 2020). Research shows that principals often begin by identifying the internal strengths and weaknesses of the school, such as teacher competence, infrastructure readiness, and students' level of religious understanding, while at the same time analyzing external opportunities and threats, such as parental support, community participation, and government policies. This stage of situational analysis becomes the foundation for determining realistic and contextually relevant strategies.

Principal's Strategy in Strengthening Character Education to Optimize the Formation of Religious Cultural Schools

Once this mapping is complete, the principal formulates a vision and mission that reflect the school's commitment to religious culture and moral character. The vision is translated into long-term goals that not only target academic excellence but also moral integrity, discipline, and religiosity (Hulawa, et al., 2024). From there, various alternative strategies are drafted, and the principal selects the most suitable one after considering resources, time allocation, and stakeholder readiness. This decision-making process requires strong leadership and a participatory approach, because strategies that are decided collectively with teachers, parents, and the school committee tend to gain greater legitimacy and support during implementation.

The aspect of determining strategy also requires principals to allocate priorities and resources wisely. For instance, if the greatest obstacle is limited religious facilities, then the principal must prioritize fundraising efforts, collaboration with parents, or cooperation with community leaders to fulfill those needs before expanding programs that demand greater infrastructure. Likewise, if the challenge lies in teachers' limited competence in integrating religious values into lessons, the strategic priority must be continuous training and mentoring. Thus, strategy determination is always dynamic, context-based, and responsive to real problems faced by the school (Wening & Hasanah, 2020).

Another important aspect lies in translating strategic decisions into operational plans. Principals are not only responsible for articulating broad visions, but also for breaking them down into concrete programs such as daily religious activities, curricular integration, or extracurricular initiatives. This operationalization requires the involvement of all stakeholders, clear task distribution, and ongoing supervision. In this process, the principal often becomes a role model who demonstrates consistency in practicing religious values, because exemplary behavior is itself part of the chosen strategy.

Furthermore, strategy determination is closely tied to evaluation mechanisms. Principals who succeed in embedding religious culture in schools do not consider strategy as a static product but as a dynamic process that requires monitoring, assessment, and refinement. Evaluation is conducted not only on the outcomes, such as student behavior or program participation, but also on the processes, such as teacher commitment, parental involvement, and the effectiveness of school facilities. Feedback from teachers, parents, and students then becomes input for adjusting strategies, ensuring that the approach remains relevant and sustainable.

The sustainability of a religious culture in schools ultimately depends on the consistency and contextualization of the strategies adopted. Schools that only rely on ceremonial or temporary programs will not achieve long-term change, while those that consistently implement daily habituation, provide inspiring examples, and innovate according to the local cultural context will succeed in making religious culture part of the school's collective identity. Principals, therefore, must not only be planners but also adaptive leaders who are able to make adjustments in response to social change, technological development, and the diverse needs of students.

The integration of religious values in the curriculum, exemplary practices by teachers and staff, the habituation of congregational prayers and Qur'an recitations, collaboration with parents and the school committee, adjustments to infrastructure to support worship, and continuous evaluation of all programs are concrete manifestations of strategies that are carefully determined and consistently implemented. In this way, principals not only perform administrative and managerial functions but also embody the role of moral leaders and agents of change, who ensure that schools truly function as centers for intellectual, spiritual, and ethical growth in accordance with the vision of national education.

Conclusion

This study shows that the implementation of Permendikbud Number 20 of 2018 concerning Strengthening Character Education (PPK) at SMP Negeri 2 Sukodono took place comprehensively through the leadership strategy of the principal as the main driver. The program plan was developed participatively by involving the vice principal, teachers, and other relevant parties through an initial working meeting at the beginning of the year. This process resulted in an annual plan that included the division of tasks and the integration of character values, both national and institutional, such as discipline, responsibility, honesty, politeness, cleanliness, health, competitiveness, social relations, self-confidence, and religious practice.

Efforts to strengthen religious culture are realized through the integration of character values into the curriculum, extracurricular activities, and habit-forming programs. Regular religious activities, the provision of worship facilities, and the installation of religious visual media are part of the strategy to build a religious atmosphere in schools. In addition, consistent coordination between internal and external parties helps ensure the continuity of the program.

Evaluations are conducted in stages, including monthly, quarterly, semesterly, and annually. This evaluation process combines direct observation and assessment by subject teachers who prepare affective indicators in accordance with specific character values. Appreciation is given to students who show positive development through the addition of affective points, while students who still face obstacles receive direct guidance. The evaluation results confirm the existence of supporting factors,

such as student quality, availability of facilities, coordination between teachers, and consistency in applying rules. However, there are still obstacles in the form of low role modeling by some teachers, rule violations by students, lack of parental support, and the influence of family dynamics on the formation of religious character.

Reflectively, this study proves that the principal's strategy in implementing Permendikbud No. 20 of 2018 is effective in building a religious culture in line with the national character education vision. This success is supported by role models, curriculum integration, community participation, adaptation of facilities, and continuous evaluation. The religious culture that has been created not only improves the quality of students' character but also builds a harmonious and conducive school atmosphere. Thus, the strategic role of the principal has proven to be crucial in making schools centers for religious character development in line with the national policy mandate. These findings open up opportunities for further research in other educational institutions to produce implementation models that can be replicated and expanded to strengthen the moral foundation of the nation through religious-based character education.

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