

## Human-centered leadership strategies for religious and moral development in early childhood education

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### Abstract

**Background:** Early childhood education is a critical stage for the development of religious and moral values, as children undergo rapid cognitive, emotional, and behavioral growth. School leadership plays a strategic role in shaping learning environments that support value formation. However, leadership practices in early childhood education are still rarely examined from a human factor perspective.

**Aims:** This study aims to analyze human-centered leadership strategies implemented by school principals in fostering religious and moral development among early childhood learners and to identify human-related constraints in their implementation.

**Method:** This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach. Data were collected through direct field observations, participatory observation, and documentation at an early childhood education institution. The data focused on leadership practices, daily learning activities, and interactions among principals, teachers, students, and parents. Data analysis followed the stages of data reduction, data organization, interpretation, and conclusion drawing.

**Results:** The findings reveal that principals implemented three main human-centered leadership strategies: habituation, role modeling, and partnership. Habituation involved routine religious and moral activities, role modeling was demonstrated through disciplined and ethical behavior by educators, and partnership emphasized collaboration with teachers, parents, and the community. Despite positive impacts on children's moral and religious development, several challenges were identified, including limited facilities, insufficient variation in teaching methods, and negative environmental influences such as excessive digital device use.

**Conclusion:** Human-centered leadership strategies contribute significantly to the development of religious and moral values in early childhood education. Strengthening institutional support and collaboration with parents is essential to optimize these strategies.

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## INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) represents a critical stage in human development, as it provides the foundation for children's cognitive, emotional, social, and moral growth. In Indonesia, early childhood education is designed for children aged 0–6 years through structured stimulation that supports both physical and psychological development, preparing them for subsequent levels of formal education. At this stage, children are expected to develop moral and religious values, emotional regulation, social competence, motivation, and positive learning attitudes as integral components of lifelong learning (Susanto, 2017; UNESCO, 2021). This

foundational role of early childhood education is further reinforced by Undang-Undang Nomor 20 Tahun 2003 tentang Sistem Pendidikan Nasional, which positions ECE as a preparatory stage prior to basic education.

Early childhood is widely recognized as a sensitive developmental period characterized by rapid growth and significant behavioral change. During this phase, children experience accelerated cognitive, emotional, and moral development compared to later life stages, making early educational experiences particularly influential and enduring (Berk, 2022; Phillips & Shonkoff, 2020). Development at this stage occurs through continuous processes of maturation and interaction with the surrounding environment, indicating that moral and religious values are not formed solely through direct instruction but are shaped through consistent human interaction and daily social experiences.

In educational settings, leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping learning environments and institutional culture. Educational leadership involves the strategic coordination of human resources, instructional practices, and organizational goals to enhance learning quality and student development (Bush, 2019). School principals, as educational leaders, are expected to design and implement strategies that motivate teachers, foster professional collaboration, and support effective teaching and learning processes. Contemporary leadership literature emphasizes that principals must demonstrate adaptive leadership behaviors to respond to diverse educational challenges and learner needs (Hallinger, 2020).

Within early childhood education institutions, the role of the principal becomes particularly complex. Principals are not only responsible for administrative management but also for guiding teachers, engaging parents, and serving as moral role models for young learners. Leadership in early childhood education requires strong interpersonal skills, emotional sensitivity, and a deep understanding of child development and pedagogical practice (Botutihe et al., 2020; Thornton et al., 2022). Educational regulations in Indonesia further define school principals as teachers assigned to lead and manage educational institutions across levels, highlighting the dual pedagogical and managerial nature of their role (Botutihe et al., 2020).

From a human factor perspective, educational leadership is fundamentally shaped by human behavior, decision-making, and social interaction. Human factors in education refer to the influence of leadership behavior, interpersonal relationships, attitudes, and competencies on educational processes and outcomes (Salas et al., 2017). Accordingly, leadership that recognizes human factors plays a crucial role in shaping well-being within educational organizations, as leadership behaviors influence psychological conditions, social climate, and everyday interactions among educators and learners (Kelloway et al., 2017; Nielsen et al., 2009; Zohar & Luria, 2005). In early childhood education contexts, these human factors become particularly salient, as children learn moral and religious values primarily through observation, imitation, habituation, and emotional attachment to significant adults. Leadership strategies such as habituation, role modeling, and partnership therefore represent human-centered mechanisms through which moral values are internalized.

Moral and religious education introduced during early childhood aims to enable children to distinguish between right and wrong and to apply ethical principles in everyday life. Empirical studies indicate that early moral education significantly influences children's social adjustment, emotional regulation, and acceptance within their communities (Murdiono, 2008; Nucci et al., 2018). Moral and religious development is a shared responsibility involving schools, families, and social environments. Formal early childhood education institutions, such as kindergartens and playgroups, play a strategic role in reinforcing these values through daily routines, structured activities, and collaboration with parents.

Religion and morality are closely interconnected, as moral behavior is often grounded in religious teachings and early spiritual experiences. Parents play a crucial role in introducing religious values at home, while schools reinforce these values through structured educational practices (Fristyarini, 2025; Lestari & Lidyasari, 2024; Munastiwi et al., 2021). Values function as guiding standards that shape human behavior, whereas morality refers to habitual conduct aligned with socially accepted norms and ethical principles (Murdiono, 2008; Soenarjati, 2022). Children who are exposed to consistent moral and religious education from an early age are more likely to develop stable ethical awareness and character in later stages of life.

Despite extensive discussion on moral education and school leadership in early childhood settings, existing studies tend to emphasize curricular content and instructional strategies, with relatively limited attention to leadership practices examined through a human factor lens (López, 2024; Peleg, 2012; Wilkinson, 2021). In particular, there remains a lack of empirical research exploring how principals' leadership behaviors, interpersonal interactions, and human-centered strategies shape the development of religious and moral values in early childhood education, especially within Islamic-based community institutions. This gap highlights the need for research that integrates leadership, moral education, and human factors to provide a more comprehensive understanding of educational practice.

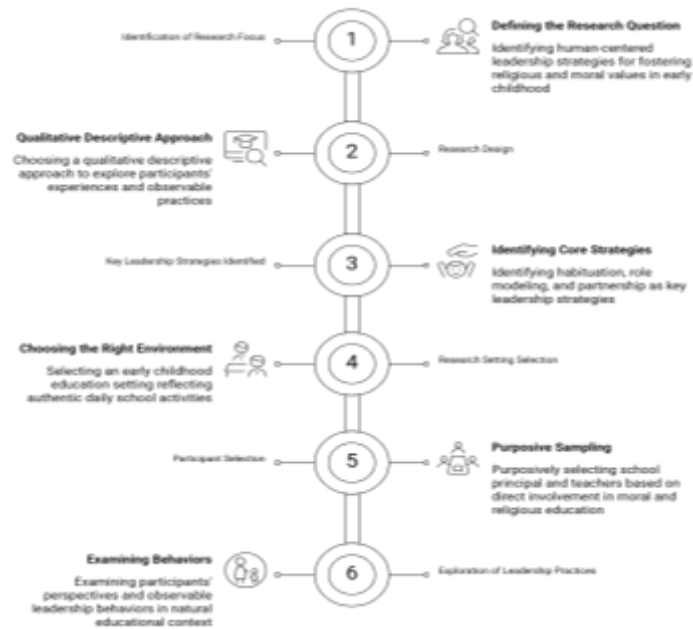
Responding to this gap, the present study examines human-centered leadership strategies employed by school principals in developing religious and moral values among early childhood learners. Specifically, this study aims to (1) analyze how principals' leadership strategies grounded in human factors contribute to the development of religious and moral values in early childhood education and (2) identify human-related constraints faced by principals in implementing these strategies.

This study contributes to the literature in three important ways. First, it extends research on early childhood education by framing school leadership strategies within a human factor perspective. Second, it provides empirical insights into how habituation, role modeling, and partnership function as human-centered leadership mechanisms in moral and religious education. Third, the findings offer practical implications for school leaders, teachers, and policymakers in designing leadership practices that prioritize human interaction, ethical modeling, and collaborative engagement in early childhood education contexts.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore human-centered leadership strategies implemented by school principals in fostering religious and moral values among early childhood learners. A qualitative descriptive approach was selected because it enables systematic, factual, and accurate descriptions of social phenomena based on participants' experiences and observable practices within natural educational settings (Moleong, 2018; Sandelowski, 2000). The research design focused on identifying leadership practices grounded in human-centered principles, particularly those emphasizing interpersonal interaction, habituation, role modeling, and collaborative partnerships. These leadership strategies were examined to capture how principals enact moral and religious values through everyday leadership behaviors and decision-making processes within early childhood education environments. The study was conducted in an early childhood education institution chosen to ensure an authentic and contextually rich setting for examining leadership practices as they naturally occur in daily school activities. Participants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement in planning, implementing, and supervising educational programs related to the development of religious and moral values. This selection strategy aligns with qualitative

research principles that prioritize information-rich cases and context-specific understanding of complex social phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The overall research process, from the identification of human-centered leadership strategies to the selection of the research site and participants, is illustrated in Figure 1 to provide a clear overview of the study's methodological structure.



**Figure 1.** Research procedure of the qualitative descriptive study

Figure 1 illustrates the overall research procedure, providing a visual overview of the qualitative descriptive approach, participant involvement, data collection processes, and analytical stages that guided the exploration of students' learning difficulties.

The participants in this study consisted of the school principal and teachers at KB Al-Miftah PPMU Panyebben Palengaan, Pamekasan. Purposive sampling was applied to ensure that all participants possessed relevant knowledge, professional experience, and direct engagement with leadership practices related to moral and religious education. Their roles as educational leaders and practitioners enabled them to provide in-depth, contextualized insights into how human-centered leadership strategies are conceptualized and implemented in early childhood settings (Sugiyono, 2019; Patton, 2015).

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and reflections on leadership practices, particularly those related to habituation, role modeling, and partnership-based approaches in moral and religious education. This interview format allowed flexibility in probing participants' perspectives while maintaining alignment with the research focus (Yusuf, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Non-participant observation was employed to examine how leadership strategies were enacted during routine school activities without direct researcher involvement, allowing the capture of natural interactions and behaviors within the educational setting (Sugiyono, 2019). Documentation, including institutional records, program plans, and activity reports, was analyzed to support and

corroborate data obtained from interviews and observations, thereby enhancing data completeness and credibility (Moleong, 2018).

Data analysis was conducted through an interactive qualitative process involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Interview transcripts, observation field notes, and documentary data were systematically reviewed, organized, and coded to identify recurring patterns and themes related to human-centered leadership strategies. This analytical procedure followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which emphasizes iterative movement between data collection, analysis, and interpretation. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, triangulation across data sources and data collection techniques was applied, ensuring consistency and rigor in interpreting leadership practices and their influence on the development of religious and moral values in early childhood education (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Sugiyono, 2019).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Direct field observations were conducted on May 23, 2022, from 07:00 to 09:30 WIB, with the aim of examining the principal's strategies in developing religious and moral values among early childhood learners at KB Al-Miftah PPMU Panyeppeen Palengaan, Pamekasan. The observations revealed that the principal implemented three main strategies, namely habituation (repetition), role modeling, and partnership strategies. These strategies were applied both in learning activities and in daily life within the school environment. In general, teacher resources were considered sufficient to support the implementation of these strategies.

Furthermore, each strategy was implemented using different forms and approaches, tailored to the objectives of developing religious and moral values in early childhood.

### 1. Habituation Strategy

The habituation strategy was implemented by teachers and the principal through a warm and child-friendly approach. Forms of habituation included encouraging children to greet others when entering and leaving the classroom, reciting prayers before and after learning activities, practicing prayer, learning short surahs and daily supplications, and applying the 5S culture (greeting, salutation, smiling, politeness, and courtesy). These habituation activities were carried out not only at school but were also continued by parents at home. Through repeated and consistent habituation, children became accustomed to practicing religious activities in their daily lives.

### 2. Role Modelling Strategy

The role modeling strategy was manifested through the demonstration of discipline, honesty, enthusiasm in participating in religious activities, and mutual respect between teachers and students. Good disciplinary habits must begin with educators themselves, as discipline cannot be instilled in students if leaders and teachers are unable to demonstrate disciplined behavior in their daily actions. Children tend to imitate the attitudes and behaviors of adults around them, making role modeling a crucial strategy in the development of religious and moral values.

### 3. Partnership Strategy

The partnership strategy was implemented through the involvement of all members of the school community in religious activities, as well as collaboration with parents and the wider community. Through this cooperation, the school was assisted in monitoring children's behavior both inside and outside the school environment. Partnerships with parents were particularly important to ensure that supervision and habituation practices at school were aligned with parenting patterns at home.

In general, a strategy can be defined as a broad guideline for action in achieving predetermined goals, or as the organization of potential and resources to obtain efficient results in accordance with planned objectives (Fadillah & Ratri, 2017). In the educational context, the principal is the highest leader in an educational institution, responsible for managing and organizing the implementation of learning programs in schools (Botutihe et al., 2020).

The principal plays a central role in determining the direction and success of a school. School success is largely determined by the principal's leadership, including the ability to build high expectations for teachers and students, understand leadership responsibilities, and direct all school components toward shared goals.

Religious values play a significant and influential role in children's lives. Values instilled from an early age serve as provisions for children in navigating and interpreting life. These values become a source of energy that supports the early stages of children's personal development (Fakhrudin, 2018). Morality, derived from the Latin word *mores*, meaning customs, habits, and behavior, can be understood as the values and norms that guide individuals in regulating their conduct (Hallinger & Wang, 2020).

The development of religious and moral values can be achieved through the cultivation of positive character traits that become embedded within children, enabling them to grow into religious, civilized, moral, and dignified individuals. This process constitutes an aspect of spiritual intelligence that must be developed from an early age. The instillation of religious and moral values in early childhood shapes children's instincts to accept virtuous attitudes and noble values, and to practice commendable behavior in daily life.

The principal's strategies for developing religious and moral values were adapted to children's developmental stages by involving various aspects of development, including religious and moral, physical-motor, cognitive, social-emotional, language, and artistic aspects. Strategic planning was carried out through several steps, namely preparing daily programs, establishing collaboration with teachers, collecting various forms of information regarding children's development, involving parents to obtain relevant information about children, and adjusting activities to match students' interests and talents.

The implementation of the principal's strategies at KB Al-Miftah PPMU Panyepren Palengaan, Pamekasan, had been carried out for a considerable period; however, it had not yet reached an optimal level. This condition was due to several constraints, particularly limitations in human resources and facilities. The principal was appointed in 2019, and at the initial stage, the strategies had not been fully implemented by teachers and students. Therefore, the principal made efforts to introduce a sense of love for Allah, feelings of security, and affection toward children so that the habituation, role modeling, and partnership strategies could continue to be implemented to this day, although the outcomes have not yet been optimal.

The purpose of implementing these strategies was to enhance the development of learning programs and to achieve the educational objectives expected by teachers and students. The principal adopted a religious-oriented strategy, encouraging all teachers to implement habituation, role modeling, and partnership strategies. Over time, these strategies began to show progress, and students gradually imitated the behaviors and examples demonstrated by teachers and the principal.

Nevertheless, the implementation of the principal's strategies did not fully meet expectations due to several existing constraints. The obstacles identified in this study included inadequate facilities and infrastructure, as well as negative environmental influences.

Limitations in facilities and infrastructure were evident in the limited number of classrooms, the condition of buildings that still used old walls, and insufficient learning and play

facilities. Some children were still required to learn while sitting on the floor without desks, and both indoor and outdoor play equipment was insufficient, preventing all children from playing simultaneously. In addition, limitations in human resources, particularly in the variation of teaching methods, caused children to become easily bored and disengaged. These constraints had been reported to the foundation, but had not yet received optimal attention.

Negative environmental influences also posed a challenge to the development of children's religious and moral values. Some children experienced excessive use of electronic devices due to a lack of parental supervision at home. This condition affected children's behavior and their ability to adapt at school. The principal had provided guidance and warnings to parents; however, some parents continued to experience difficulties in controlling their children's habits.

Therefore, the principal must continuously pay attention to students' attitudes, speech, social skills, sense of security, and feelings of affection. Attention to the family and community environment is essential to minimize negative influences. Strong collaboration between schools, parents, and other institutions must be continuously maintained, as it will have a positive impact on children's growth, development, and future.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This study indicates that the principal's strategies for developing religious and moral values in early childhood are implemented through structured learning activity programs that include habituation or repetition strategies, role modeling strategies, and partnership strategies. These three strategies are carried out through close collaboration between the principal and teachers in every learning activity, beginning with the habituation of reciting prayers, memorizing daily supplications, practicing prayer, and continuing with learning activities in accordance with the planned instructional design. Through the implementation of these strategies, children are guided to develop in alignment with Islamic values in their daily lives.

However, the implementation of these strategies continues to face several challenges, particularly limitations in facilities and infrastructure, such as the availability of educational play equipment, indoor and outdoor play facilities, as well as constraints in human resources. These challenges have been reported to the school foundation and are expected to be addressed in subsequent learning activities. In addition, negative environmental influences, especially excessive use of digital devices by children, also present challenges that affect children's moral and religious development as well as the overall learning process. Therefore, the principal continues to make efforts to improve future learning practices through the provision of supporting facilities and by strengthening collaboration with parents in monitoring and supporting children's development within the family and community environments.

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## **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT**

All authors contributed substantially to this study. AY contributed to the research conceptualization, data collection, and initial drafting of the manuscript. LN contributed to research design, data analysis, and manuscript revision. JU and RR contributed to data

interpretation, literature review, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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