Shaping excellent moral character early: a qualitative study of transformational leadership in the era of engineered moral decline

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Abstract: The environment and social circle can influence the character development of students, especially at an early age, especially amid the onslaught of technology, which sometimes has a more negative impact on character development. Exemplary behavior, charisma, inspirational motivation, mentoring, and emotional support from transformational leadership will create an environment conducive to strengthening students' positive character. This study aimed to examine the influence of transformational leadership in preparing a generation of students with excellent character from the early stages of education. This study used a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation studies of school principals, teachers, educational staff, students, and parents. Data analysis used an interactive model analysis with stages of data reduction, data presentation, and data verification. Data validity used credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The results of the study show that the strengthening of character education in schools is highly dependent on the leadership role of the principal as a role model, inspirer, and facilitator, who through real example, appreciation, positive communication, and policies and programs that support creativity and habit formation, is able to stimulate the internalization of character values such as religiosity, discipline, responsibility, social awareness, cooperation, and love for the country in students without making them feel forced. These findings reveal that investing in character education from an early age in elementary school is a strategic step to prepare a generation that is not only diligent and productive, but also has a legacy of noble values for future generations.

Keywords: character education, elementary school, digital era, moral decline, transformational leadership, values internalization

1. Introduction

An individual's character is shaped by a combination of genetic factors and external influences, including the environment in which they are born, the family in which they are raised, friendship, exposure to external influences, and life experiences. In the midst of globalization, the phenomenon of systemic moral decline has become increasingly familiar. This is partly due to the influence of Western culture, which has gradually begun to erode the noble Eastern values passed down through generations. Principles like collectivism and mutual cooperation are slowly being replaced by individualism and hedonism. As a result of this cultural shift, we are witnessing the emergence of a generation that tends to be apathetic, lacks social sensitivity, and is more focused on fulfilling their own personal gratification.

This moral problem becomes even more complex with the presence of technology, which should ideally serve as a tool for empowerment but is instead deliberately designed in ways that distort children's moral development. If not addressed wisely, it risks becoming a destructive force in children's psychological and moral growth. Numerous longitudinal studies and meta-analyses have demonstrated a significant correlation between exposure to violent media and increased aggressive behavior in children and adolescents (Anderson et al., 2010; Mößle et al., 2014; Ybarra et al., 2022; Li et al., 2020; Yao et al., 2019; Kreft & Boguszewicz-Kreft, 2024; Ahuja & Kumar, 2024; Chen et al., 2024; Schuster & Lazar, 2024; Masters-Wheeler, 2024; Al-Ali, 2018; Bushman, 2015; Bender et al., 2018). Within the framework of Social Cognitive Theory, Bandura (2020) explains that children tend to adopt behaviors they observe from figures they perceive as attractive or powerful, including characters in violent media.

When children are continuously exposed to content that normalizes violence as a way to resolve conflicts, a process of desensitization occurs, a diminished emotional sensitivity to the suffering of others (Anderson et al., 2010; Mößle et al., 2014; Anderson et al., 2017; Bender et al., 2018).

In extreme cases, the internalization of these aggressive values can trigger acts of bullying that go beyond reasonable bounds (Ybarra et al., 2022), such as severe physical abuse with fatal consequences. The lack of supervision and low levels of digital literacy make children vulnerable to various forms of violence and exploitation (Kreft and Boguszewicz-Kreft, 2024), including child grooming carried out systematically through digital platforms (Dinas Komunikasi, Informatika, dan Statistik, 2026). Longitudinal research conducted by Ybarra et al. (2008) found that adolescents who regularly consume violent media are three times more likely to engage in aggressive behavior at school, including life-threatening physical bullying. This condition is further exacerbated by an identification mechanism in which perpetrators feel that such brutal acts are justifiable because they are imitating what they see on screen, without understanding the real-world consequences of violence (Yao et al., 2019; Li et al., 2020). Data shows that elementary school students account for the highest percentage of bullying cases at 26%, followed by junior high school students at 25% (Pusiknas Bareskrim Polri, 2025). The vulnerability of elementary school students is often triggered by high curiosity about digital devices without adequate guidance, leading them to engage in extreme actions in order to gain external validation or recognition among their peers (KPAI, 2025).

Educated parents serve as protectors for children against the harmful effects of digital media exposure (Hermawan & Kudus, 2021; Mößle et al., 2014; Bender et al., 2018). However, a crisis of role modeling within the family environment has also become a common reality that children encounter in their own households. The phenomenon of fatherlessness or motherlessness, which refers to the psychological absence of parental roles, has created family dysfunction (Blankenhorn, 1995), resulting in a lack of role models at home. Consequently, children lose their fundamental moral foundation and become vulnerable to the negative influences of technology, particularly social media and online platforms—and tend to engage in blind conformity without critically filtering values (Anderson et al., 2010; Li et al., 2020; Yao et al., 2019; Kreft & Boguszewicz-Kreft, 2024).

The role of schools in intervening in these problems becomes crucial (Mößle et al., 2014). Schools are expected to serve as the main supporting pillar and central agent in shaping children's character within the school environment (Anderson et al., 2010). Schools are not only responsible for transferring knowledge about right and wrong, but must also equip students with adaptive life skills so they can survive and contribute in the future (Li et al., 2020; Karakasidou et al., 2024). The process of building critical awareness, initiative, and curiosity must begin early, and elementary school serves as the most strategic arena, especially for those who do not receive similar stimulation at home (Mößle et al., 2014). The role modeling approach from educational leaders becomes the most effective pedagogical instrument, where children will naturally adopt the character of figures they love and feel cared for by (Anderson et al., 2010; Bender et al., 2018; Li et al., 2020), as explained by social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) that children learn through observation and imitation of figures they consider significant. Therefore, the character-building process cannot be carried out solely through verbal instruction, but must be manifested in daily concrete actions (Bender et al., 2018; Li et al., 2020). From the elementary education level, children need to be guided to understand their life goals, explore various paths that can be taken to achieve those goals, and be equipped with independent problem-solving skills (Kreft and Boguszewicz-Kreft, 2024).

In Indonesia, character education is an essential component that must be taught in schools to shape students who excel not only academically but also morally and socially. Building strong character takes considerable time, which is why elementary school serves as the foundational stage for instilling character values that will guide students' behavior in the future, ultimately shaping a generation that is characterized, intelligent, and able to compete in the years ahead. This is reinforced by Law Number 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, which emphasizes that education must develop students' potential holistically so they become individuals of faith, noble character, competence, creativity, and responsibility. Within the context of modern pedagogy, character cultivation is now strengthened through the Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) approach, which affirms that moral intelligence must align with the ability to manage emotions and empathy (Durlak et al., 2011). However, the internalization of these values cannot occur mechanically; it requires an ecosystem built through the Transformational Leadership of the Principal. A principal with a transformational leadership style serves as an agent of change who not only manages administration but also provides inspirational motivation, role modeling, mentoring, and emotional support for

the entire school community (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Through intellectual stimulation, the principal encourages teachers to creatively integrate character values into the curriculum, so that moral education is no longer mere memorization but becomes a living school culture. With a transformational vision, the principal ensures that these character values become a collective energy that transforms students' habits at the elementary level into lasting integrity (Leithwood, 2021).

Studies on strengthening student character through a transformational leadership approach, as an effort to prevent moral degradation that erodes student character from the elementary school level, without making students feel forced to internalize these values, remain limited. Therefore, this study aims to examine how transformational leadership in schools can serve as the main bulwark in preparing and shaping students' excellent character amidst an era of systematic moral degradation, as well as to explore in depth the leadership role-modeling practices that are effective in building student character from the elementary level. The findings of this research are expected to serve as a source of insight and a framework for educational stakeholders in developing early character strengthening systems for students.

2. Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study method, chosen because the research focuses on an in-depth exploration of the principal's leadership role in strengthening character education at SD Inpres Bobolon. The research was conducted at SD Inpres Bobolon, located in Lampa Village, Banggai District, Banggai Laut Regency, from September to December 2025. SD Inpres Bobolon has a total of 24 teachers and education staff, consisting of 6 males and 18 females. There are 15 study groups with a total student population of 371, comprising 194 male students and 177 female students. The school's vision is "To Realize a Generation of Noble Character, High Achievement, and Technological Competence." SD Inpres Bobolon was selected as the research site due to its strong commitment to implementing the Character Education Strengthening program at the elementary school level.

Data sources were obtained from the principal, three classroom teachers, one education staff member, two students, and two parents, and were supported by official school documents such as the vision and mission statements, work programs, and school rules, which provided a comprehensive overview of the principal's transformational leadership in strengthening character education. Data collection techniques included semi-structured interviews to obtain in-depth data regarding the principal's transformational leadership in strengthening education and the participants' experiences, as outlined by DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019); (2) passive participatory observation to observe behavioral patterns of the school community, forms of role modeling, disciplinary practices, and consistency in implementing quality values, as explained by Uwamusi and Ajisebiyawo (2023); and documentation studies to support interview and observation data, as recommended by Brooks et al. (2019), in order to generate comprehensive and credible data.

Data analysis employed content analysis through three stages conducted iteratively and interactively: data reduction, which involved selecting and simplifying data according to the research focus; data presentation in the form of narratives, tables, diagrams, and direct quotations; and conclusion drawing and verification, which were carried out progressively alongside deeper analysis. Data validity was maintained through source and technique triangulation, member checking, and prolonged engagement, as recommended by Miles et al. (2014), to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings.

3. Results

3.1 The influence of principal role models in strengthening character education

The research findings indicated that the influence of the principal's role modeling in strengthening character education at SD Inpres Bobolon was highly significant. The principal demonstrated exemplary behavior that was indirectly emulated by colleagues, namely teachers and education staff, as well as students. The principal at SD Inpres Bobolon did not merely carry out the role of a manager who handled administrative tasks and institutional policies. The principal served as a role model, appearing as a central figure who directly embodied character values through attitude, behavior, and manner of interaction. This role modeling by the principal did not simply function

as a complement to school policies, but rather served as the main foundation that brought character values to life in daily practices within the school environment.

The principal also demonstrated strong role modeling through the consistent application of time discipline in daily school activities. This was reflected in the principal's habit of always arriving earlier and leaving later than anyone else, demonstrating a high commitment to leadership duties and responsibilities. In addition to modeling time discipline, the principal also adopted a humanistic approach in daily interactions, both within the school environment and beyond. Through this approach, harmonious working relationships with colleagues were established, and emotional closeness with students was developed. This continuously cultivated humanistic approach fostered mutual trust and a sense of comfort, encouraging colleagues to carry out their tasks conscientiously without the need for strict directives. Furthermore, the principal's attitude of prioritizing empathy and wisdom when giving advice was also evident when addressing students who had committed violations. The principal built open communication with students, such as listening to their concerns, understanding the background of the problems, and providing educational solutions.

3.2 The principal's ability to inspire and motivate the school community in strengthening character education

The research findings indicated that the principal's ability to inspire and motivate the school community provided stimulus and played a significant role in strengthening students' character education at SD Inpres Bobolon. The principal's role as a source of inspiration and motivation was evident in the ability to build collective work spirit within the school environment. This was manifested through positive, open, and constructive communication patterns, as well as through the provision of appreciation for every achievement attained by teachers and education staff. The principal provided appreciation in various forms, both verbally through praise and expressions of recognition, and symbolically in official school forums. This appreciation was not only directed at large-scale achievements, but also at efforts, progress, and positive contributions. In the effort to motivate and inspire, the principal felt that it was not enough to motivate solely through words. The principal felt the need to motivate and inspire through concrete actions or daily behavior. A tangible form of the principal's motivation was through active involvement in school extracurricular activities and other events, demonstrating a high commitment and concern for strengthening students' potential and character. This direct involvement from the principal provided a sense of security, motivation, and enthusiasm for the school community, enabling school activities to run in an orderly, effective manner, and in line with the character education goals to be achieved.

Through this inspirational and motivating leadership, teachers and education staff were encouraged to demonstrate attitudes and behaviors aligned with character values in the learning process and daily interactions. As a result, students not only gained academic knowledge but also experienced a continuous process of internalizing character values such as discipline, responsibility, cooperation, and social awareness.

3.3 The principal's ability to create an environment that supports creativity and innovation in strengthening character education

The research findings indicated that the principal's ability to create an environment that supported creativity and innovation helped strengthen student character at SD Inpres Bobolon. The principal provided space and trust for teachers to explore new ideas, varied learning strategies, and innovative approaches relevant to character values. The principal was open to all ideas presented by teachers as long as those ideas did not deviate from the school's vision. In the learning process, it was found that the principal consistently encouraged teachers to develop varied and engaging teaching methods, so that teachers felt supported in trying new approaches, experimenting with creative learning strategies, and adapting methods to the characteristics of students. This encouragement not only improved the quality of learning but also fostered a culture of innovation within the school, enabling the character education strengthening process to be carried out more effectively, contextually, and enjoyably for students. Beyond classroom learning processes, the principal also supported creativity within the school environment through various school activities and innovative programs involving both students and teachers. The principal provided freedom for teachers and students to develop creative ideas, while still offering guidance to ensure that these activities aligned with the character values to be instilled.

A school environment that was open, supportive, and appreciative of new ideas was able to encourage teachers to deliver meaningful and contextual learning, so that character values were not only taught theoretically but were directly experienced by students. Furthermore, support for creativity and innovation fostered attitudes of self-confidence, responsibility, cooperation, and critical thinking skills in students, all of which constituted an important part of character education.

3.4 The principal's ability to facilitate the school community in strengthening character education

The principal viewed the strengthening of character education as a process integrated into the daily life of the school. The instillation of character values was carried out not only through classroom learning, but also through continuous habituation and the creation of a conducive school environment. To support this, the school designed and implemented various routine and meaningful programs. Some of the programs implemented by the school included the Friday Charity program, which was carried out regularly. This program involved all members of the school community, including students, teachers, and education staff, with the aim of instilling values of social awareness and sincerity from an early age. In addition to the Friday Charity program, SD Inpres Bobolon also held Yasinan (communal prayer) activities. The Friday Charity and Yasinan activities were conducted at different times. The school arranged the schedule on a rotating basis each week. This scheduling was done to ensure that each activity could be carried out optimally without disrupting the learning process. Through the implementation of Yasinan activities, the school instilled religious values in students. In addition to programs based on religious values, SD Inpres Bobolon also had programs that promoted nationalist values, such as singing the national anthem "Indonesia Raya" every day. This activity was mandatory as a strategy to instill nationalist values in all members of the school community. This activity was carried out routinely and simultaneously, thereby habituating students to respect state symbols and fostering a sense of patriotism, discipline, and togetherness.

The principal played a strategic role as the main driver in creating a school environment that supported the strengthening of character education at SD Inpres Bobolon. The principal utilized the authority as a policy maker optimally by providing various habituation programs. The principal's ability to facilitate these programs had a direct impact on the internalization of character values, such as religiousness, discipline, responsibility, social awareness, cooperation, and patriotism, in the daily lives of the school community. Thus, the principal's leadership not only functioned at the managerial level, but also served as a catalyst that ensured the strengthening of character education was implemented in an integrated, sustainable, and meaningful manner within the school environment.

The interrelationship and integration of the four roles of the principal as a transformational leader in strengthening character education at SD Inpres Bobolon can be visualized in the following diagram:
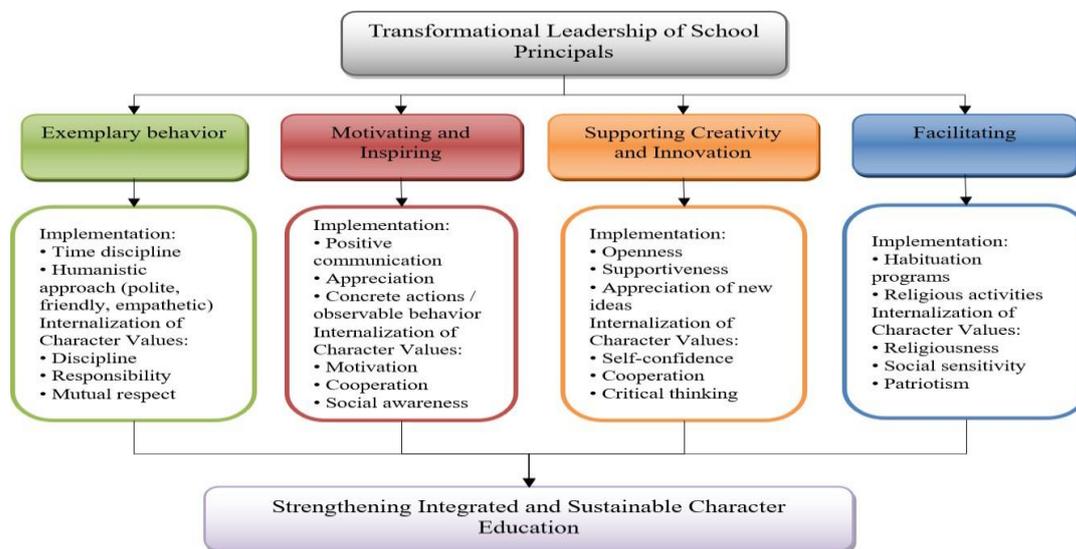

Figure 1. Implementation of transformational leadership by the principal in strengthening character education at SD Inpres Bobolon

4. Discussion

4.1 The influence of principal role models in strengthening character education

The principal's role modeling in terms of time discipline and other aspects had a broad impact on the entire school community at SD Inpres Bobolon. This impact was not only individual but also systemic, influencing the organizational culture, school climate, and the quality of relationships among school members. This aligns with the theory put forward by Mulyasa (2023) that leadership is a process of exerting influence within an organization to achieve goals as expected. The principal of SD Inpres Bobolon sought to influence the school community through role modeling to achieve shared goals. One of these goals was the strengthening of character education. This goal can be achieved if a leader truly sets a good example through role modeling for all members of the school community.

The principal's role modeling through time discipline created high behavioral standards and encouraged professionalism in work. When the principal demonstrated time discipline, in this case, always arriving on time and showing consistency in this aspect, it established an unwritten moral standard. When teachers observed that the principal arrived earlier and left later than everyone else, they felt reluctant to arrive late or leave early without a valid reason. This feeling did not arise from fear of sanctions, but from respect and appreciation for the example set by their leader. In the long term, this pattern of behavior becomes internalized and becomes part of the professional culture of teachers and staff at the school.

The impact of the principal's role modeling was highly significant in character formation. Children at the elementary school age are at a developmental stage where they are easily influenced by the role models around them. When they see the principal arriving early every day, they learn about the importance of discipline and commitment. When they see the principal being friendly and polite to everyone, they learn about the importance of respecting others. Learning through observation and imitation is highly effective in instilling desired character values. In the context of character education strengthening, role modeling is the most powerful educational method. Students learn character not only from the formal curriculum, but from the "hidden curriculum", that is, the daily behavior of the principal. The time discipline demonstrated by the principal becomes real evidence for students that character is about action, not merely theory. The time discipline shown by the principal as a form of leadership role modeling is reinforced by the view of Nurdin et al. (2023), who stated that when a principal demonstrates dedication (such as arriving on time), it creates a domino effect that strengthens teachers' self-regulation. Thus, time discipline is no longer a matter of coercion, but rather a reflection of work motivation built through the principal's vision. When all members of the school community, from the principal, teachers, and staff to students, practice good time discipline, the learning process becomes more effective and efficient.

In addition to time discipline, the principal employed a humanistic approach. When members of the school community saw the principal being friendly, polite, and empathetic toward everyone, they learned about the importance of respecting others. Learning through observation and imitation proved highly effective in instilling desired character values. In this context, the social learning theory pioneered by Bandura emphasizes that individuals, especially elementary school students, learn through a modeling process that encompasses four phases: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation (Bandura, 1977; 2023).

A principal's humanistic approach, characterized by empathy, politeness, and friendliness, fosters a sense of psychological comfort and captures the attention of the school community by establishing a trustworthy and inclusive school climate (Carrasco-Aguilar et al., 2025). Within the framework of social learning, principals serve as salient behavioral models whose high institutional status combined with emotional intelligence facilitates the adoption of pro-social practices among staff and students (Jackson, 2023; Gunawan, 2019). This friendly behaviour is cognitively processed by teachers and students, forming a mental schema of effective leadership that they subsequently emulate in their daily interactions (Gunawan, 2019). As the school community observes that a humanistic attitude fosters a peaceful and respectful environment, they become intrinsically motivated to sustain these behaviors (Carrasco-Aguilar et al., 2025). However, the success of this modeling is highly dependent on the leader's perceived integrity and the consistency between their words and actions (Prasetiyo et al., 2025). Students do not merely follow verbal instructions; they internalize observed behaviors as the prevailing moral standard of their environment, leading to an organic development of values rather than a response to coercive methods

(Berson & Oreg, 2016; Gunawan, 2019). Consequently, exemplary behavior is a primary vehicle for character education because it engages the natural processes of observation and internalization (Prasetiyo et al., 2025). This leadership style builds moral legitimacy, encouraging school members to align with common goals and increasing their ownership of the school's vision (Prasetiyo et al., 2025). Unlike traditional indoctrination, exemplary leadership facilitates a more meaningful and enjoyable learning experience for students, while simultaneously serving as a vital mechanism for the intergenerational transfer of core values within the educational ecosystem (Berson & Oreg, 2016; Howard, 1986).

Character values that have stood the test of time need to be transmitted to the younger generation so that they can become a sustainable cultural heritage. By applying this approach, the principal of SD Inpres Bobolon was essentially engaging in "character engineering", not merely by instructing the school community to be good, but by demonstrating what goodness looks like through concrete actions. This is the most effective strategy for elementary schools, because children at this age are more easily shaped by what they see than by what they hear.

4.2 The principal's ability to inspire and motivate the school community in strengthening character education

One of the characteristics of transformational leadership is the leader's ability to inspire and motivate. The research findings indicated that the principal of SD Inpres Bobolon had implemented the dimension of inspirational motivation in transformational leadership for strengthening character education at the school. This dimension is one of the four main components of transformational leadership proposed by Bass and Avolio, known as the "4I's": Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, and Individualized Consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006). According to Bass, inspirational motivation is reflected through behaviors that provide meaning and challenge for followers, such as conveying clear expectations and demonstrating commitment to the overall organizational goals.

In an effort to inspire and motivate, the principal of SD Inpres Bobolon was able to serve as a source of inspiration through behaviors, attitudes, and policies that provided motivation and role modeling for the entire school community. According to Nthini (2024), this capacity reflects the dimensions of idealized influence and inspirational motivation in transformational leadership theory, where the leader acts as a moral anchor who provides meaningful vision for staff and students, particularly in strengthening character education. The leader does not merely assign technical tasks, but connects those tasks to a larger value, the ability to inspire and motivate.

The motivational strategy implemented by the principal of SD Inpres Bobolon was through the provision of appreciation. The principal possessed a strong understanding of the importance of positive reinforcement in education, which served as a stimulus that could impact the performance of colleagues, in this case the teachers. In the context of elementary schools, Santoso et al. (2022) found that daily appreciation given spontaneously by the principal (such as short messages or direct praise) created psychological safety that made teachers more courageous in experimenting with new teaching methods. Appreciation was given not only for large-scale achievements, but also for small things. In addition to appreciation given to teachers, the principal also provided appreciation to students who achieved excellence both academically and non-academically. This appreciation functioned not only as a reward, but also as a means of fostering motivation, self-confidence, and students' pride in their school. The principal's strategy of appreciating small things demonstrated an understanding that motivation is built not only by major events or achievements, but by the accumulation of daily recognition carried out consistently. This contributed to the strengthening of character values such as hard work, responsibility, sportsmanship, and the spirit of achievement. The strategy at SD Inpres Bobolon proved that effective leadership does not always have to be rigid. An appreciative approach was able to transform the school climate into one that was more productive for strengthening character education.

The principal of SD Inpres Bobolon recognized that motivation is not enough if conveyed only through words, but must be accompanied by concrete actions and daily behavior. Therefore, the principal made an effort to be directly involved in every extracurricular activity. When the top leader was present on the field, values of discipline and hard work were being transferred non-verbally. This certainly strengthened the principal's credibility; teachers and students did not feel forced to work hard because they saw their leader doing the same. By being directly

involved in extracurricular activities, the principal ensured that activities ran smoothly. The physical presence of the principal conveyed the message that extracurricular activities held the same level of importance as academic activities. Moreover, by being directly present in every school activity, the principal was able to carry out supervisory functions while also providing quick problem-solving. For example, if there were facility shortages or technical obstacles during activities, the principal could immediately make decisions or provide solutions. This ensured that activities ran in an orderly and effective manner in line with school goals. This active involvement provided a sense of security, motivation, and enthusiasm for supervising teachers and students alike, enabling extracurricular activities to proceed in an orderly, effective manner and in accordance with the goals of character education.

Through inspirational and motivating transformational leadership, teachers and educational staff are encouraged to display attitudes and behaviors that are in line with character values in the learning process and daily interactions (Effendi, 2023; Effendi et al, 2021). As a result, students not only gain academic knowledge, but also experience the process of internalizing character values such as discipline, responsibility, cooperation, and social awareness on an ongoing basis (Effendi, 2022; Junaidi et al, 2025). In addition, inspirational leaders are able to create a collaborative, supportive, and appreciative work environment, so that teachers feel valued and motivated to integrate character education into every learning activity (Effendi, 2023; Junaidi, 2023). Character values are not only conveyed theoretically, but also implemented through active, reflective, and contextual learning methods. As a result, students not only acquire academic knowledge, but also undergo a process of internalizing character values such as motivation, responsibility, cooperation, and social awareness on an ongoing basis (Schwartz, 2015; Effendi, 2022). This internalization process occurs through direct experiences in social interactions, as well as a school culture that consistently supports the strengthening of character education (Effendi, 2022; Efendi, 2023; Junaidi, 2023). In the long term, this shapes students who are not only intellectually intelligent but also emotionally and socially mature (Effendi, 2022; Komala, 2023; Junaidi, 2023).

4.3 The principal's ability to create an environment that supports creativity and innovation in strengthening character education

The principal's ability to create an environment that supports creativity and innovation can determine the process of strengthening character education. The principal of SD Inpres Bobolon had made efforts to create an environment that supported the creativity and innovation of the school community. This conducive environment provided space for teachers and education staff to develop new ideas in learning, design varied activities, and adjust strategies for strengthening character education by considering the needs and context of students. This dimension is one of the four main components of transformational leadership proposed by Bass and Avolio (1994): transformational leaders strive to stimulate their followers to be innovative and creative, to reframe problems and approach them in new ways, without public criticism of individual members' mistakes. In this context, the principal did not merely provide directions, but also encouraged teachers to think critically, explore different learning methods, and dare to make improvements without fear of criticism when individual errors occurred. Mistakes were viewed as part of the learning and improvement process, not as something to be blamed. The principal should possess a deep awareness of the importance of building trust and providing full support for creative ideas proposed by teachers. A principal who demonstrates openness to all ideas presented by teachers, as long as they do not deviate from the school's vision, and who is able to acknowledge creative contributions, can help address the challenges faced by the school, in this case, strengthening character education. According to Edmondson (2019), this openness is closely related to the concept of psychological safety. In a school environment with high psychological safety, teachers feel secure in taking intellectual risks and expressing innovative ideas without fear of criticism or failure. The principal's support, accompanied by attention to the school's main goals, reflects leadership that not only encourages innovation but also demonstrates responsibility. This makes teachers feel confident to innovate and create, and believe that every positive idea will be valued and supported at school.

The principal of SD Inpres Bobolon also consistently encouraged teachers to develop varied and engaging learning methods, not only to overcome limitations in facilities and infrastructure, but also to foster a culture of innovation within the school. The principal also viewed that creativity within the school environment was not limited to classroom activities. Under the principal's leadership, an innovation ecosystem was built through various school projects and creative programs involving active collaboration between students and teachers. The principal

provided ample space for the development of fresh ideas, while still offering strategic guidance to ensure that every initiative remained aligned with the instillation of character values.

Although full freedom was given in their work, guidance is still provided by the principal to ensure that every creative idea remained grounded in the school's main objective of strengthening character education at SD Inpres Bobolon. Thus, School principals who exercise transformational leadership contribute significantly to the establishment of creative and innovative work environments by inspiring staff and empowering them to participate in change processes (Kilag et al., 2023; Trimulyo et al., 2025). Ultimately, an environment that fosters creativity and innovation not only enhances the overall quality of learning but also significantly strengthens the internalization of character values in students (Firdaus & Djatmiko, 2024; Arta et al., 2024). By witnessing a school culture defined by open-mindedness and the courage to explore new ideas, students begin to adopt these values as their own moral standards (Feng, 2020; Yusni et al., 2024). Through these firsthand experiences, students learn that positive character development is a continuous process that flourishes through sustained effort, reflection, and collaborative engagement within a supportive social-educational ecosystem (Firdaus & Djatmiko, 2024; Karakasidou et al., 2024).

4.4 The principal's ability to facilitate the school community in strengthening character education

The aspect of facilitation represents a fundamental leadership dimension in strengthening character education. Effective leadership is not only about providing role modeling and motivation, but also about providing the infrastructure, systems, and support that enable character education to be implemented optimally. The research at SD Inpres Bobolon revealed how the principal understood and carried out this facilitative role comprehensively and strategically. The principal played an active role in facilitating and coordinating character education strengthening programs. One of the routine programs implemented was Friday Charity, which involved all members of the school community, including students, teachers, and education staff. This program aimed to instill values of social awareness, empathy, and sincerity in students from an early age. The implementation of the Friday Charity program at SD Inpres Bobolon was designed in a structured manner, and this activity served as a means of contextual learning for students in fostering social awareness, empathy, and sincerity.

In addition to the Friday Charity program, the school also carried out Yasinan (communal prayer) activities as part of religious-based character education strengthening. These activities were not conducted simultaneously, but were scheduled alternately each week. This scheduling arrangement aimed to ensure that each program could be implemented optimally without disrupting classroom learning processes. Through Yasinan activities, the school sought to instill religious values, such as faith, piety, and the habit of prayer. Meanwhile, through the Friday Charity program, students were accustomed to sharing and caring for others. Therefore, religious activities were presented as part of the school's effort to fortify students with values of faith, noble character, and positive habits in daily life. This effort aligns with the concept of Character Education Strengthening (PPK), which emphasizes the importance of harmonizing the cultivation of heart (ethics and spirituality), taste (aesthetics and empathy), thought (literacy), and sport (kinesthetics) through habituation within the school environment (Kemendikbud, 2017).

Theoretically, the practice of consistent habituation, such as the Friday Charity and Yasinan activities, aligns with the view of Lickona (2019), who stated that effective character education must encompass moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. Moral knowing relates to students' understanding of goodness values, such as caring, sincerity, and responsibility. Moral feeling touches the affective aspect, namely the development of empathy, compassion, and moral awareness within students. Meanwhile, moral action emphasizes the ability and willingness to realize these values in concrete actions. In this context, students not only understand the value of goodness but also feel and practice it directly through real activities at school. Furthermore, according to Nucci and Narvaez (2008), a supportive school environment that provides role modeling plays an important role in shaping students' character sustainably. An environment that consistently displays positive values through school culture, interactions among members, and shared commitment in implementing habituation programs strengthens the process of character internalization.

SD Inpres Bobolon not only emphasized religious-based character education strengthening but also consistently instilled nationalist values through the daily habituation program of singing the national anthem "Indonesia Raya."

This activity was mandatory and carried out routinely at 9:30 AM. This habituation had become well-internalized within school life. All members of the school community appeared accustomed to it and demonstrated discipline and collective awareness in implementing the activity. This indicated that the program was not merely carried out as a formal routine but had become part of the school culture. The consistency in timing also trained time management, adherence to rules, and shared responsibility in maintaining order. The habituation program of singing "Indonesia Raya" served as a means of instilling nationalist values, patriotism, and unity. Through reflection on the lyrics and meaning of the national anthem, students were invited to understand the nation's struggle, the importance of unity, and the commitment to maintaining the integrity of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia. Furthermore, this activity strengthened students' national identity from an early age, fostering a sense of pride as Indonesian citizens. In the long term, the internalization of nationalist values through consistent habituation will shape a generation that possesses not only academic intelligence but also strong national awareness and a commitment to contributing to the nation and state.

The programs that had been implemented did not merely function as routine activities but also served as a means of internalizing religious and social values relevant to students' needs and the challenges of the era, providing positive impacts for both students and the broader school community. Thus, habit formation practices, when executed in a structured and sustainable manner by school principals utilizing transformational leadership, do more than merely shape momentary behaviors; they establish a robust foundation for long-term character development in students (Malla et al., 2020). By fostering a conducive school environment and maintaining consistent routines, transformational leaders enable values such as religiosity, empathy, social awareness, and responsibility to flourish naturally and persist over time (Tohet et al., 2025). This process of internalization is driven by continuous habituation and the principal's role as a visible exemplar who mobilizes the entire school community toward these shared moral goals (Rahmawati et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The transformational leadership of the principal in strengthening character education at SD Inpres Bobolon plays a highly strategic role in building and reinforcing student character within the school environment. The principal, who applies the principles of transformational leadership, is able to act as an agent of change through a clear vision, role modeling, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual attention to all members of the school community. The characteristics of transformational leadership implemented include: (1) The principal's role modeling has a significant influence on strengthening student character education. Through attitudes and behaviors that serve as examples for teachers and students, the principal is able to effectively instill values of discipline, responsibility, and integrity within the school environment. (2) The principal's ability to inspire and motivate teachers and students through appreciation and concrete actions proves to encourage active participation and commitment from the school community in strengthening character education. (3) The principal's ability to create a learning environment conducive to creativity and innovation plays an important role in strengthening character education. An open environment that supports student and teacher initiatives facilitates the development of character values through varied and creative learning practices. (4) The principal plays an active role in instilling character values through policies, school programs, and organizational culture that support the strengthening of character education. Furthermore, the principal's transformational leadership proves capable of creating a school climate that is conducive, collaborative, and oriented toward the strengthening of character education.

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