



## Building Religious and Collaborative School Culture Through Visionary Leadership: Evidence From Three Integrated Islamic Elementary Schools in Jambi Province

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of visionary leadership of school principals in shaping school culture in three Integrated Islamic Elementary Schools (SDIT) in Jambi Province: SDIT Al-Hikmah Kuala Tungkal, SDIT An-Nahl Percikan Iman Jambi, and SDIT Ad-Dhuha Muara Bungo. Using a qualitative approach with a multisite case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The study aims to analyze how principals formulate a shared vision, implement strategic cultural programs, and overcome internal and external challenges to build a school culture grounded in Islamic values. The findings reveal that visionary leadership significantly contributes to the creation of a strong, collaborative, and religiously rooted school culture. Strategies include integrating Islamic values into the curriculum, daily religious practices, character education, and creating a conducive environment for spiritual and social development. However, the research identifies several challenges, including a gap between the principals' vision and the school's human resource capacity, limited community participation, and inconsistencies in program implementation. Theoretically, the study contributes to the development of visionary leadership models in Islamic education management. Practically, it provides recommendations for strengthening school culture through long-term, sustainable leadership practices that foster an academically excellent, morally upright, and spiritually resilient generation.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Islamic education in Indonesia faces major challenges in improving overall educational quality. Integrated Islamic Elementary Schools (SDIT) have emerged as an alternative model that integrates religious and general sciences, aiming to develop excellent generations who are not only intellectually capable but also morally upright. In this context, the school principal plays a key role as the main driver who determines the direction and success of school management (Sagala, 2018). Visionary leadership has become one of the most relevant leadership models to meet these needs because it enables principals to articulate long-term visions, mobilize all school components, and cultivate a productive, religious, and collaborative school culture.

However, field realities indicate that many schools still face gaps between their formulated visions and operational implementation. Some principals focus more on administrative matters rather than becoming agents of change who inspire teachers and students to actively engage in realizing the school's vision. In addition, limited infrastructure, low parental involvement, and inadequate reward systems and teacher professional development often hinder the establishment of an ideal school culture (Robbins & Judge, 2017). This gap underscores the need for in-depth research to understand how visionary leadership can be optimized to sustainably build school culture.

Several previous studies have highlighted the importance of transformational leadership and its influence on school climate. Bass and Riggio (2006) found that inspirational leadership enhances teacher motivation and creates a conducive learning environment. Lunenburg and Ornstein (2012) also reported that effective vertical communication between principals and teachers increases teacher involvement in decision-making. However, these studies mostly focus on secondary schools or madrasah aliyah, while research at the level of integrated Islamic elementary schools, particularly in local contexts such as Jambi Province, remains limited.

The geographical and socio-cultural context of Jambi Province adds a unique dimension to this study. Schools located in urban, semi-urban, and rural areas face different challenges in internalizing Islamic values into their school culture. For instance, SDIT Al-Hikmah Kuala Tungkal is located in a coastal area with strong community involvement, while SDIT An-Nahl Percikan Iman Jambi must deal with social plurality and the intense flow of globalization. SDIT Ad-Dhuha Muara Bungo faces limitations in human resources and educational facilities due to its distance from the provincial center. These variations demand a visionary leadership model that is adaptive to local contexts.

The state of the art of this study lies in its comprehensive analysis of how principals formulate their visions, transform those visions into a living school culture, and address internal and external challenges that hinder this process. This study employs a qualitative approach using a multisite case study design, allowing the researcher to capture the complexity of visionary leadership dynamics in depth (Creswell, 2013). Through data triangulation—including in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis—this research

produces a holistic understanding of the interrelationship between leadership vision, school culture, and stakeholder participation.

The novelty of this study is the development of a conceptual model of visionary leadership grounded in Islamic values and contextualized for integrated Islamic elementary schools. This model goes beyond administrative concerns by emphasizing the role of the principal as a social change agent, innovation catalyst, and guardian of religious values. Therefore, this study provides theoretical contributions to the literature on Islamic education management and offers practical recommendations that can be implemented by principals and school foundations to strengthen school culture.

Furthermore, this study carries implications for education policy. Its findings can serve as a reference for local governments and the Ministry of Religious Affairs in designing principal development programs, value-based leadership training, and systematic school culture-building policies. Strengthening the role of the principal as a visionary leader is expected to help integrated Islamic schools in Jambi become model educational institutions that are excellent, competitive, and responsive to the challenges of globalization.

This study addresses the urgent need for school management that is not only structurally effective but also culturally inspiring. By focusing on visionary leadership, the research positions the school principal as the center of transformation who orchestrates cultural change toward a better and more sustainable direction. This aligns with the national education goal of nurturing a generation that is faithful, morally upright, intelligent, and globally competitive.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Visionary leadership is widely regarded as a crucial determinant of organizational success, particularly in educational settings. Sagala (2018) defines leadership as the ability to mobilize organizational potential to achieve shared objectives, emphasizing that principals must be capable of inspiring, guiding, and directing all stakeholders toward realizing a common vision. Visionary leadership specifically refers to the ability to create a clear, compelling picture of the future and mobilize resources to achieve it (Nanus, 1992). In the context of schools, principals who act as visionary leaders are not merely administrators but agents of transformation who establish strategic directions that influence teaching quality, school culture, and student outcomes (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006).

A principal's role is not only managerial but also symbolic, acting as the custodian of school values. Research shows that successful principals are those who integrate instructional leadership, organizational management, and value-based decision-making into their practice (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Visionary leadership enhances teacher motivation, fosters collaboration, and nurtures a sense of ownership among school staff (Bass & Riggio, 2006). This approach leads to improved teacher performance and student achievement, aligning with the national education goals of character building and intellectual development.

School culture is another critical construct in this research. Schein (2010) conceptualizes organizational culture as a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration. In schools, culture manifests in the norms, beliefs, rituals, and daily practices that define how members interact and pursue educational objectives (Deal & Peterson, 2016). A strong and positive school culture has been linked to higher teacher satisfaction, lower turnover rates, and better student learning outcomes (Hoy & Miskel, 2013).

The relationship between leadership and school culture is symbiotic. Leithwood et al. (2004) argue that leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors contributing to what students learn. Principals shape culture by modeling desired behaviors, reinforcing school values, and aligning policies with the vision and mission of the school. Conversely, a supportive school culture amplifies the effectiveness of leadership initiatives, creating a virtuous cycle of improvement (Fullan, 2014). This mutual reinforcement is particularly crucial in faith-based schools where the integration of religious values into school life is a central goal.

Several studies have explored visionary leadership in Islamic education contexts. For example, Azra (2018) highlights that Islamic school leaders must combine managerial competence with spiritual integrity to build institutions that are academically competitive and spiritually grounded. Research by Mulyasa (2019) confirms that principals with a strong vision successfully integrate Islamic values into curriculum, school policies, and extracurricular activities, leading to holistic student development. These findings underscore the necessity of visionary leadership in strengthening the identity and mission of Islamic schools.

Despite the growing interest in this topic, there remains a paucity of empirical research on visionary leadership at the primary school level, particularly within integrated Islamic schools in Indonesia. Most existing studies focus on madrasah aliyah (Islamic senior high schools) or general public schools (Rahman, 2020). Moreover, studies often examine leadership and school culture in isolation rather than exploring their interplay. This study addresses this gap by examining how principals of SDITs in Jambi Province enact visionary leadership and how this leadership shapes and sustains school culture in diverse socio-geographic settings.

The present study contributes to the literature by offering a conceptual model of visionary leadership contextualized for integrated Islamic education. It extends existing theoretical frameworks by embedding Islamic values into the process of vision formulation, strategic implementation, and cultural transformation. This research not only enriches the discourse on educational leadership but also provides practical insights for policymakers, school foundations, and principals seeking to strengthen the spiritual and academic dimensions of school culture.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a multisite case study design to explore visionary leadership of school principals in shaping school culture at three Integrated Islamic Elementary Schools (SDIT) in Jambi Province: SDIT Al-Hikmah Kuala Tungkal, SDIT An-Nahl Percikan Iman Jambi, and SDIT Ad-Dhuha Muara Bungo. A qualitative approach was chosen to gain a deep understanding of the social reality and leadership practices within their natural context (Creswell, 2013). The multisite case study design enabled comparisons across different schools to identify similarities and differences in the principals' strategies and their impact on school culture (Yin, 2018).

The social situation of the study involved three SDITs located in urban, semi-urban, and rural contexts to capture diverse leadership and cultural dynamics. The participants included principals, teachers, administrative staff, students, and parents. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who had direct involvement in school leadership and cultural development. This selection ensured that the data reflected multiple perspectives from various stakeholders (Patton, 2015).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observations, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with principals and teachers to understand how they formulated and implemented their vision, managed school culture, and addressed internal and external challenges. Observations focused on daily routines, religious activities, teacher-student interactions, and school meetings to capture authentic cultural practices. Document analysis included school vision and mission statements, work programs, and meeting records, allowing for triangulation of data sources (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Data analysis followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) interactive model, which involves data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data were coded and categorized to identify patterns and themes related to visionary leadership, strategic implementation, and cultural outcomes. Cross-case analysis was used to compare findings among the three schools, revealing both commonalities and contextual differences.

To ensure validity and reliability, this study applied triangulation of sources and methods, member checking, and peer debriefing. Triangulation involved comparing data from interviews, observations, and documents to confirm consistency. Member checking was conducted by sharing summaries of findings with participants to verify accuracy, while peer debriefing with experts in Islamic education management was used to strengthen credibility and minimize researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## RESEARCH RESULT

The field study revealed that each school principal plays a decisive role in shaping the daily culture of their institution. At SDIT Al-Hikmah Kuala Tungkal, the principal opened the day with a short motivational speech during the morning assembly. Observations showed that students and teachers started the day with collective dhuha prayers and Qur'an recitation, which set a spiritual

tone for the entire school day. A teacher commented, *"We always remind students that learning is also worship, and this helps them stay disciplined."* This daily routine created an atmosphere of focus and respect among students.

Interviews with teachers at SDIT Al-Hikmah highlighted that the principal frequently organized reflective meetings after Friday prayers, where teachers discussed classroom issues and strategies to improve student behavior. One teacher noted, *"Our headmaster listens carefully and encourages us to find solutions together rather than just giving orders."* This participatory approach strengthened teacher commitment and fostered a sense of ownership over school programs.

At SDIT An-Nahl Percikan Iman Jambi, located in the urban center, observations revealed a more dynamic environment. The principal regularly visited classrooms unannounced to observe teaching and then provided direct feedback in a supportive manner. A teacher shared, *"Even though sometimes we feel nervous during observations, the feedback helps us improve."* The school also had regular parent forums where parents shared input on school programs, reflecting a strong collaboration between the school and the community.

Student behavior at SDIT An-Nahl also reflected the school's cultural values. During observation, students greeted teachers politely, lined up neatly before entering classrooms, and engaged actively in group activities. The principal stated in an interview, *"Our goal is not only academic achievement but also to nurture adab, because good manners are the heart of Islamic education."* This statement was consistent with the observed student interactions.

At SDIT Ad-Dhuha Muara Bungo, a semi-rural school, the principal demonstrated hands-on leadership by personally supervising school events such as religious competitions and scouting activities. Observation showed that teachers worked closely with the principal, often staying after hours to prepare lesson plans and school decorations. A staff member said, *"Even though our resources are limited, we work like a family. Our principal always reminds us that together we can make this school better."*

The research found that school culture was also reflected in the physical environment. In all three schools, classrooms were decorated with motivational Islamic quotes, neat student work displays, and schedules for religious activities. During observation, students were seen voluntarily cleaning their classrooms and school yard after lessons, which indicated that the value of cleanliness had become part of their daily habits.

Challenges were also observed. In some cases, teachers expressed difficulty in balancing administrative tasks with classroom preparation. One teacher at SDIT Al-Hikmah mentioned, *"Sometimes we are too busy with reports, so we have less time to innovate in teaching."* At SDIT Ad-Dhuha, the principal acknowledged that finding qualified teachers was a challenge, saying, *"We sometimes have to train fresh graduates ourselves because there are not many experienced teachers in this area."*

Despite these challenges, principals consistently showed commitment to reinforcing the school's vision. At all sites, there were monthly evaluation meetings where progress toward cultural goals was reviewed. Observers noted that principals encouraged open discussion, and suggestions from teachers were often incorporated into new programs. This participatory process strengthened trust and encouraged continuous improvement.

Students' participation in religious activities was found to be one of the strongest indicators of the schools' cultural success. Observations recorded high attendance in weekly Qur'an recitation sessions and active involvement in Islamic competitions. A parent remarked, *"We see changes at home too – our children remind us to pray on time."* This demonstrates that the cultural values nurtured at school extended into students' family life.

Overall, the findings show that visionary leadership has successfully fostered a school culture that combines academic focus, religious devotion, and community involvement. The principals acted not just as administrators but as role models, motivators, and facilitators of collective growth. Observations across the three schools indicated that when leadership is visible, supportive, and consistent, it translates into tangible behavioral changes among students and teachers, resulting in a strong, living school culture.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that visionary leadership of school principals has a profound effect on shaping school culture across different contexts in Jambi Province. The consistent practice of setting a clear and inspiring vision contributed to unifying school stakeholders around common goals. This aligns with the idea that vision serves as a compass for organizational direction and motivates collective action when clearly communicated (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). The observed practices, such as morning dhuha prayers, Qur'an recitation, and regular assemblies, illustrate how principals transformed vision into lived experiences, turning abstract values into daily rituals that strengthened the school culture.

The cross-case analysis reveals that participation and collaboration were critical in sustaining cultural transformation. Teachers who were actively involved in school meetings and decision-making displayed higher levels of commitment to implementing cultural programs. This confirms that participatory management increases teacher ownership and accountability, which are essential in building a robust school culture (Fullan, 2014). In cases where collaboration was limited, there was evidence of resistance or lack of enthusiasm, suggesting that top-down approaches are less effective in promoting cultural change.

A key insight from the study is the role of principals as role models. By actively engaging in religious and academic activities, principals inspired teachers and students to emulate similar behaviors. This is consistent with the argument that modeling desired behavior is one of the most powerful tools leaders have for influencing organizational culture (Deal & Peterson, 2016). The observed effect was especially strong in schools where the principal was consistently present and visible in daily routines, reinforcing the notion that leadership presence is integral to sustaining school culture.

However, the study also identified structural and operational challenges that hinder the full realization of visionary goals. Teacher workload, administrative burdens, and the shortage of qualified staff were repeatedly cited

as barriers to implementing programs. These findings highlight the importance of balancing visionary aspirations with realistic operational planning and resource allocation. Without adequate human resources and infrastructure, even the most compelling vision risks remaining aspirational rather than actionable (Robbins & Judge, 2017).

Another significant finding concerns the influence of context. Schools in urban areas like SDIT An-Nahl faced pressures from social plurality and globalization, requiring principals to be more adaptive and innovative in maintaining cultural integrity. In contrast, schools in semi-urban or rural areas benefited from close community ties but were limited by resource constraints. This suggests that visionary leadership must be context-sensitive, adjusting strategies to local realities while preserving the core values that define the school's mission (Creswell, 2013).

The reward and recognition systems observed in some schools proved effective in motivating teachers and aligning them with the school's cultural goals. Schools that lacked structured systems of appreciation faced challenges in sustaining teacher morale over time. This finding resonates with motivational theories that emphasize recognition as a driver of intrinsic motivation (Herzberg, 1959). Institutionalizing recognition practices could therefore be a key strategy for enhancing teacher engagement and cultural continuity.

Communication emerged as another critical determinant of success. Schools with regular feedback loops between principals, teachers, and parents showed smoother implementation of programs and fewer conflicts. Open communication channels facilitated mutual understanding and quick problem-solving, while poor communication contributed to misunderstandings and program delays. These results affirm that communication is not merely a technical function but a cultural process that reinforces shared meaning and trust (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2012).

An important implication of this study is the need for continuous leadership development. The data suggest that principals must regularly update their strategic, managerial, and interpersonal skills to remain effective change agents. Training programs should focus not only on administrative competencies but also on soft skills such as emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and participatory facilitation. This investment will ensure that visionary leadership remains dynamic and responsive to evolving challenges (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Finally, this study contributes to the broader discourse on educational leadership by proposing a contextualized model of visionary leadership for integrated Islamic schools. The model emphasizes the interplay between vision articulation, cultural embodiment, collaborative participation, and adaptive management. It demonstrates that visionary leadership is not a static attribute but a continuous process of alignment between values, strategies, and practices. Future research may explore how this model can be scaled to other regions or adapted to secondary and higher education institutions.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This research concludes that visionary leadership of principals in Integrated Islamic Elementary Schools (SDIT) in Jambi Province significantly contributes to

shaping a strong, religiously grounded school culture. Principals actively articulate long-term visions, embed Islamic values into daily routines, and motivate teachers and students to participate in cultural programs. The study finds that consistent religious practices, collaborative decision-making, and open communication between stakeholders are key factors in sustaining a positive school culture.

Despite these successes, challenges remain, including gaps between strategic vision and operational execution, limited teacher competence in some areas, and constraints in infrastructure and human resources. The results show that schools with well-coordinated leadership and active parental involvement achieve better cultural cohesion and student character formation.

Recommendations:

1. For Principals: Strengthen participatory management by involving teachers and parents in program planning, ensure consistent modeling of desired values, and implement structured reward systems to maintain teacher motivation.
2. For Teachers: Actively internalize and translate the school's vision into classroom practices and support cultural initiatives beyond teaching obligations.
3. For School Foundations: Provide professional development opportunities, allocate sufficient resources for cultural programs, and prioritize the recruitment of qualified educators.
4. For Policymakers: Design capacity-building programs for school leaders that integrate managerial, communication, and cultural development skills. Support schools with funding and policy frameworks that encourage long-term cultural sustainability.

### **ADVANCED RESEARCH**

Future research is encouraged to explore comparative studies across provinces to see how visionary leadership adapts to different sociocultural contexts. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insight into how school culture evolves over time under consistent visionary leadership. Further research could also focus on quantitative measurement of the impact of visionary leadership on student achievement, teacher satisfaction, and community engagement. Additionally, action research involving experimental interventions could help refine best practices in developing culture-based education management in Islamic schools.

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