



MTs Principal Strategies in Strengthening Character Education in Kendal District

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Abstract: The decline in student character is reflected in weakened discipline, reduced respect for educators, and low social awareness. This study aims to reveal the leadership strategies of madrasah principals in strengthening character education at MTs Negeri 2 Kendal and MTs NU 07 Patebon, Kendal Regency. Using a qualitative approach with a descriptive design, data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, then analyzed through data reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that principal leadership plays a vital role in shaping student character through role modeling, habituation, integrated learning, and creating a religious and inclusive school climate. Supporting factors include a conducive school environment, collaboration with parents, and teachers as role models. Challenges include weak family supervision, negative impacts of technology, and low student commitment. The success of these strategies is reflected in students' affective scores and the development of responsible, high-quality individuals who contribute positively to society.

Keywords: character education; leadership; madrasah principal strategy

Abstrak: Fenomena penurunan karakter peserta didik terlihat dari melemahnya disiplin, berkurangnya rasa hormat terhadap pendidik, serta rendahnya kepedulian sosial. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji strategi kepemimpinan kepala madrasah dalam memperkuat pendidikan karakter siswa di MTs Negeri 2 Kendal dan MTs NU 07 Patebon, Kabupaten Kendal. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain deskriptif, melalui teknik observasi, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi. Analisis data dilakukan melalui proses reduksi, penyajian, serta penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan kepala madrasah berperan signifikan dalam pembentukan karakter siswa melalui keteladanan, pembiasaan, pembelajaran terpadu, serta penciptaan iklim sekolah yang religius dan inklusif. Faktor

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pendukung meliputi lingkungan sekolah yang kondusif, kerja sama dengan orang tua, dan teladan dari guru, sedangkan hambatan mencakup lemahnya pengawasan keluarga, dampak negatif teknologi, serta kurangnya komitmen sebagian siswa. Keberhasilan strategi terlihat pada nilai afektif siswa dan terbentuknya pribadi berkualitas, bertanggung jawab, serta berkontribusi positif di masyarakat.

Kata Kunci: kepemimpinan; pendidikan karakter; kepala madrasah

Introduction

Moral issues are a serious and long-standing concern that continue to accompany human life across various places and times. Today, character education has become an urgent necessity, not only within the school environment but also to be instilled at home, in social life, and within the community. Moreover, character education is no longer aimed solely at children and adolescents but is also highly important for adults. This is crucial for the sustainability and future of the nation. Character is a key factor in determining a person's success. In a study by Arifin et al (2024) in the United States, 90% of employment termination cases were caused by negative behaviors such as a lack of responsibility, dishonesty, and poor interpersonal skills. Furthermore, other studies have shown that around 80% of an individual's success in social life is determined by emotional intelligence (emotional quotient), rather than merely intellectual intelligence.

A similar situation is also occurring in Indonesia, where character education is urgently needed due to the increasing number of moral decline cases frequently reported in the media. This issue is no longer a concern only for the elite but has also become a shared worry among the general public, including students who represent the nation's future generation. Phenomena such as corruption, collusion, nepotism, brawls, juvenile delinquency, and bullying are increasingly common, highlighting the need for educational intervention, as stated in the study by Arifin et al (2024). Therefore, education must serve as a solution to address these problems. Today, countries worldwide aim to develop educational systems that cultivate societies upholding honesty and justice in all aspects of life. As Amin (2024) emphasizes, it is essential to foster an inclusive and diverse learning environment, encourage respect for various moral values, and develop critical thinking on ethical issues.

The process of character education is most challenging between the ages of 13 to 15, when students enter early adolescence. At this stage, they tend to distance themselves from their parents and express their identity within their peer groups. Generally, they are at the junior high school level. Therefore, school principals must be able to implement effective management that fosters a school culture oriented toward developing noble character in students. Teachers are likewise challenged to apply proper management in planning and conducting learning activities that integrate character values (Hartati et al, 2020). According to Raharjo et al. (2022), this stage of character development is often marked by low learning motivation, a lack of respect for others especially teachers and minimal concern for their surroundings.

In the process of instilling character values in students, the school principal holds a central role in managing the school's educational system. As the top leader of the institution, the principal must be able to mobilize teachers, staff, and students to foster strong determination, enthusiasm, and self-confidence in carrying out their respective duties and responsibilities. In addition, the principal must provide

direction, guidance, encouragement, and inspiration, while leading from the front to drive progress toward achieving the school's goals (Wening & Santosa, 2020). Essentially, school leaders must ensure the availability of adequate facilities and services for students so they can develop strong faith and piety, noble character, excellence in knowledge and skills, physical and mental health, a stable personality, independence, as well as a sense of social and national responsibility, in line with the objectives of national education.

The research problems are formulated as follows: (1) What strategies are implemented to strengthen character education at MTs NU 07 Patebon and MTs N 2 Kendal? (2) What factors support and hinder character education at MTs NU 07 Patebon and MTs N 2 Kendal? (3) What are the results of the implementation of principals' leadership strategies at MTs NU 07 Patebon and MTs N 2 Kendal?

This research is categorized as descriptive phenomenological research, as it provides a closer and more detailed depiction of observed and heard aspects concerning individuals' understandings and experiences. In this context, the experiences of school principals, teachers, and students are described comprehensively to present a complete picture of the research focus. The study also adopts a case study approach, allowing an in-depth and holistic examination of a phenomenon within its real-life context. The research was conducted at two institutions, namely MTs Negeri 2 Kendal and MTs NU 07 in Patebon District, Kendal Regency. The data sources are divided into primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consist of principals, vice principals, teachers, and students, while secondary sources comprise pre-existing data or information deliberately utilized to complement the research, including school profiles, teaching materials, and activity reports. Data collection techniques include documentation, interviews, and observations, while data analysis involves three concurrent activities: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing.

Previous research topics on principals' strategies in strengthening student character can be grouped into three main trends. First, the reinforcement of character education in schools (Alawi et al., 2022; Arifin et al., 2024; Putra et al., 2022); second, principals' strategies for strengthening character education (Mustajib & Ansori, 2021; Nurhuda & Haq, 2021); and third, the role of stakeholders in fostering student character (Amalita et al., 2024; Shiddiq, 2020; Suriansyah & Aslamiah, 2015). These three research trends have not yet specifically examined principals' leadership strategies for strengthening character education at the Madrasah Tsanawiyah level under current conditions. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to reinforce the findings of previous research. Character education has recently become an essential need, as student character is perceived to be in decline. It is carried out by integrating character values into various school activities, aiming to support the realization of national education goals (Husain, 2021). This topic is highly important and warrants further investigation. Research conducted in the two MTs is particularly interesting, as its findings can serve as the basis for formulating an effective principal leadership strategy for strengthening student character education.

Students studying at madrasas are not only equipped with academic knowledge but also guided to develop strong character based on Islamic teachings. By combining general and religious subjects, madrasas instill values such as honesty, discipline, responsibility, respect for teachers and parents, and a religious attitude (Rosita, 2022). A learning environment imbued with moral and spiritual values provides a supportive environment for the development of individuals with integrity and good morals. Character development is also carried out through activities outside the classroom, such as extracurricular activities, daily worship practices, and real-life social learning. Students are encouraged to behave politely, respect differences, and be active in social activities. Through these methods, madrasas

not only produce students who excel academically but also develop emotionally and spiritually mature individuals who can serve as role models in society.

According to Lickona (1992) in his book "Educating for Character," character education consists of three main elements: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. These three elements are comprehensive and interrelated, so they must be implemented simultaneously. If only one element is developed, the character education process cannot be considered successful.

Character education is education that prioritizes the essence and meaning of morals and ethics so that it will be able to shape the character of good students. In addition, character education is also defined as an educational method implemented by educators in shaping students' characters. In this case, educators not only teach general subject matter but also must be able to be a role model for their students. In other words, the Javanese term guru is someone who deserves to be obeyed and imitated (and emulated) (Andriani et al., 2022). Tsauri (2015, p. 44) in his book "Character Education: Opportunities in Building National Character" states that character education is all efforts made by educators to teach habits of thinking and behavior that help children to live and work together as a family, society and nation and help them to make decisions that can be accounted for, character can also be termed as nature, mental traits, morals or manners that distinguish one person from another. Meanwhile, the word character is translated as having character, having personality, a stable personal attitude resulting from a progressive and dynamic consolidation process, integration of statements and actions.

Results and Discussion

MTs Negeri 2 Kendal

To achieve the desired character education goals of the madrasah, the principal, as manager or leader, must be able to implement strategies tailored to the capabilities and needs of the madrasah. Character education that meets these expectations will be realized when it is carefully prepared, starting from planning, implementation, control, and evaluation.

The character education planning policy at MTs N 2 Kendal is determined by examining the condition of the school and its vision and mission. The vision and mission of MTs N 2 Kendal serve as the foundation for determining future steps. The vision, "To create a religious, high-achieving, and environmentally friendly school," is expected to shape students' character in line with societal expectations, reflecting current developments, and enable them to compete materially in the external world. Achieving the school's vision requires planned activities, specifically the school's mission. The school's mission must outline the activities to be achieved. All activities at MTs N 2 Kendal are based on the school's vision and mission, and are incorporated into the school's strategic plans. In this regard, character education is always integrated into all activities.

In an interview with the principal, he said:

"...Strengthening character education is also embedded in the madrasah's VMTS. "The realization of a madrasah that is religious, high-achieving, and environmentally conscious." The four-year plan, in addition to being based on the KMA, is also adapted to current madrasah conditions." This demonstrates that its activities

are geared toward character education. Furthermore, character education is also integrated into the curriculum." (W1/KS/N2/2).

Madrasah, as Islamic educational institutions, play a crucial role in shaping students' character in accordance with religious and moral values. The implementation of character education at MTs N 2 Kendal is carried out through various strategies, including: (1) curriculum, (2) learning environment, (3) teacher development, and (4) community involvement. As seen in an interview with the madrasah principal.

The madrasah curriculum is designed to integrate Islamic character values into every subject. Teaching materials covering Islamic ethics, morals, and norms are an integral part of the learning process, so that students understand and internalize religious teachings in their daily lives. Co-curricular activities or habits become character values that are inseparable from the overall values implemented at MTs N 2 Kendal. For example, students shake hands with teachers upon arriving at the madrasah gate, pray by reciting a prayer before studying, and recite Surah Al-Fatihah and the Asmaul Husana. These are daily routines. Weekly activities carried out every Friday alternately include maintaining environmental cleanliness and performing istighosah. In short, religious studies, social activities, and religious activities are very positive events in shaping students' character.

The madrasah learning environment also plays a key role in the implementation of character education. Madrasahs create a conducive atmosphere for students' moral and spiritual development, emphasizing religious norms in every aspect of school life. Discipline, cleanliness, and a sense of responsibility are integrated into school policies to shape students' positive character. Furthermore, the implementation of extracurricular activities related to character development, such as Scouting, Red Cross (PMR), Marching Band, Futsal, Pencak Silat (Self-Devence), and MTQ, serve as effective tools for shaping student character. Teacher development is an integral part of the implementation of character education in madrasahs. Teachers, as role models for students, need training and guidance to effectively convey religious teachings and live daily lives that reflect desired character values. Continuous support and guidance for teachers can improve the quality of teaching and exemplary behavior, routinely conducted every Monday or once a month, so that the process of character formation in students can be effective.

Community involvement is also a key factor in implementing character education in madrasahs. Collaboration between madrasahs, parents, and the community can strengthen the character values taught in schools. Through regular meetings, joint activities, and active parental participation in madrasah life, a positive synergy can be established to support student character development. By integrating curriculum, learning environment, teacher development, and community involvement, madrasahs can become educational institutions that play a role in shaping a generation with strong character in accordance with Islamic teachings.

Character education control at MTs N 2 Kendal to ensure the effectiveness and consistency of the application of character values within the madrasah environment involves various aspects including (1) supervision, (2) evaluation, and (3) coaching.

Character education supervision is carried out by the principal, as the primary leader at MTs N 2 Kendal. The principal is responsible for overseeing and ensuring that Islamic character values are well integrated into the school curriculum and policies. With strong leadership, the principal can ensure that the implementation of character education is a primary focus in every decision and program

implemented at the madrasa. Systematic evaluation is also part of the control of character education in madrasas. This evaluation process can include assessing student achievement in internalizing character values, the effectiveness of the implemented character education program, and teacher performance in delivering character teaching materials. By conducting regular evaluations, madrasas can identify successes and obstacles in the implementation of character education, allowing for necessary improvements and enhancements. Teacher development is a crucial part of character education control in madrasas. The principal needs to provide adequate support and guidance to teachers in conveying religious teachings effectively and practicing character values in daily life. Training programs, joint reflections, and regular discussions can serve as a means of development to improve the quality of teaching and teacher role models in shaping student character.

Evaluation of character education at MTs N 2 Kendal is an important step in measuring the effectiveness and impact of implementing character values in shaping student personality. This evaluation includes: (1) assessment of student achievement, (2) assessment of the effectiveness of the character education program, (3) assessment from the community, and (4) assessment of teacher performance.

Assessment of student achievement is an evaluation through the internalization of character values. Exams, assignments, and projects that emphasize aspects of character can be used as evaluation instruments. Madrasas can measure the extent to which students have understood and applied moral and ethical values in their daily lives. Assessing the effectiveness of character education programs implemented in madrasas also serves as an evaluation of the development of positive student character. This process involves analyzing teaching methods, the success of character-related extracurricular activities, and the resulting positive impacts. Program evaluation helps madrasas identify strengths and weaknesses in efforts to strengthen student character so that necessary improvements and enhancements can be made.

Assessments from parents and the community are also a focus in evaluating character education in madrasas. Through feedback and participation in evaluation activities, madrasas can assess the level of parental and community support and understanding of the character values taught. This provides an indication of the extent to which character education in madrasas is achieving its goals and gaining full support from the external environment. Assessing teacher performance is also a crucial aspect in evaluating character education in madrasas. By conducting classroom observations, reflective discussions, and peer assessments of teaching methods and teacher role models, madrasas can assess the extent to which teachers have succeeded in conveying character values in learning.

Strengthening student character education is a crucial aspect in developing individuals with integrity and quality. The factors supporting this process are diverse and involve various elements, including the school environment, family and community, and technology.

"Thank God, the committee has been extraordinary in providing support for the programs we have planned related to student development, such as the active participation of committee members, parents, and even the surrounding community." (W1/KS/N2/9)

The role of teachers at MTs N 2 Kendal is crucial in shaping students' character. Teachers who serve as positive role models, provide guidance, and apply moral values in learning can significantly contribute to students' character development. MTs N 2 Kendal's comprehensive curriculum, which includes character education, is also a significant supporting factor. Learning materials that incorporate moral

values, ethics, and positive attitudes can help students understand the importance of having good character. Madrasas also need to create an environment that supports character building, both through school policies and extracurricular programs that emphasize the development of leadership, honesty, and cooperation. The existence of a safe and conducive madrasa environment is also a supporting factor. When students feel safe and comfortable at the madrasa, they are more likely to be open to learning and internalizing the character values taught. The establishment of a positive madrasa culture, free from harassment or intimidation, can create an atmosphere that supports the strengthening of students' character.

The role of parents and the community at MTs N 2 Kendal cannot be ignored. The family is the primary environment for children's character development. Family support in instilling positive values, providing attention, and guiding their children will have a significant impact on shaping students' character. Technology and media can also be utilized as supporting factors in strengthening the character of students at MTs N 2 Kendal. The use of technology in delivering character education materials, such as videos, educational applications, and online platforms, can provide variety and facilitate students' understanding of the values taught. However, supervision and guidance are necessary to ensure that technology is used positively and does not have negative impacts.

Several factors hinder the strengthening of students' character education, so they need to be considered in efforts to improve morality and positive values. Obstacles experienced by students at MTs N 2 Kendal include: (1) lack of attention to character education, (2) the role of a less conducive social environment, and (3) students' economic factors.

One major factor is the lack of attention to character education within the education system. Some teachers at MTs N 2 Kendal focus solely on academic achievement without prioritizing character development. As a result, ethical, moral, and personality values are often neglected. The role of the social environment can also be a barrier. Some students are exposed to less supportive environments, such as peers at MTs N 2 Kendal who hold negative values or media pressure that portrays unhealthy values, thus hindering the strengthening of character education. Misaligned value systems between the school, family, and community environments also create confusion for students in understanding and internalizing the values that should be applied. Economic factors also contribute to barriers. Among MTs N 2 Kendal students experiencing economic hardship, they focus more on meeting their basic needs, thus receiving less attention to aspects of character education. Lack of economic support results in students focusing more on survival than on moral and character development.

The principal's implementation of leadership strategies has had a significant positive impact on student character outcomes at MTs N 2 Kendal. The student character outcomes achieved through the principal's implementation of leadership strategies encompass aspects that create individuals who are qualified, responsible, and have a positive impact on society. The integrity, responsibility, and dedication demonstrated by the principal of MTs N 2 Kendal serve as models for students to follow, shaping their character within the madrasah environment. The principal leads by positive example, exerting a significant influence on student behavior and attitudes. Students' social awareness and empathy are a result of effective madrasah leadership strategies. The principal designs community service programs and social activities that engage students in helping others. Through active participation in these activities, students develop a sense of social responsibility and sensitivity to the needs of others.

Students' critical and analytical thinking skills are fostered through the implementation of a conducive leadership strategy by the principal of MTs N 2 Kendal. The principal encourages a learning approach that emphasizes problem-solving, critical thinking, and creativity. Students involved in this learning process become more independent in their thinking, developing character traits that enable them to face challenges with a cool head and find solutions. The principal's collaborative leadership also fosters effective communication and collaboration among students. Positive leadership attitudes result from the extracurricular activities emphasized by the principal of MTs N 2 Kendal. The principal can provide opportunities for students to develop leadership skills through various extracurricular activities, student organizations, or leadership programs.

MTs NU 07 Patebon Kendal

The Character Education Strengthening Policy (PPK) at MTs NU 07 is implemented through three stages: (1) planning, (2) implementation and organization, and (3) evaluation. The role of the madrasah principal in developing character education is crucial. The madrasah principal's strategy in strengthening character education is implemented by integrating character values into intra-curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities.

Character education planning at MTs NU 07 begins with introducing the Madrasah's Vision and Mission to all members of the madrasah, both internal and external stakeholders.

"The strategy we implement is through the madrasah's vision, mission, and objectives. The madrasah's vision must of course be broken down into the madrasah's programs..." (W3/KS/GPKN/NU07/2)

The introduction of the vision and mission to teachers, staff, and students as internal stakeholders is carried out through various methods and media. The madrasah's vision and mission are written on the exterior walls of the madrasah, in the meeting room, the teachers' lounge, and classrooms. Through Monday ceremonies and teacher and staff development meetings, the madrasah principal continuously reminds the madrasah community. Parents and the madrasah committee will also be familiar with the vision and mission during meetings at the madrasah. It is important for parents/guardians and the madrasah committee to know the madrasah's vision and mission to facilitate their understanding of the direction and goals of madrasah management.

The student character model to be developed is a religious-based one, with indicators including: (1) habitual greetings, (2) tolerance and mutual respect among students, (3) honesty, (4) polite behavior, and (5) concern for the environment. Strategies implemented include modeling, punishment, and collaboration with parents and the community. The evaluation results are included in affective assessments, report card grades and counseling books.

The principal of MTs NU 07 Patebon strengthens character education through coaching, teaching, modeling, and character building for all members of the madrasah. The hierarchy of role modeling within each institution makes the madrasah principal the central role model.

In this case, the madrasah principal has a sacred duty to portray the ideal attitude for all madrasah members. The Monday ceremony media is one form of media in strengthening this character. In addition, the madrasah principal socializes the strengthening of character education to the madrasah members and parents of students, and empowers teachers and staff to participate and become role models for students at the madrasah. The strategies used by the madrasah principal are 1) providing an

understanding of the character/personality of students, 2) developing Islamic culture in the madrasah, 3) character formation through special forums, (4) displaying exemplary behavior, and (5) giving sanctions to those who violate. Thus, the madrasah principal shares leadership with the madrasah members and establishes good relationships with all teachers. The implementation of strengthening character education in the madrasah is carried out by integrating character values into all subjects, exemplary behavior and spontaneous activities that are habitual, as well as integrating into extracurricular activities.

The integrated curriculum integrates character values into all subjects and aims to condition the physical and sociocultural environment of students, along with the madrasa community, to develop activities that reflect the embodiment of character education in each learning activity. Co-curricular program strategies are implemented through habituation, role modeling, and reward and punishment. Within co-curricular activities, internalization of character education values takes several forms, including: 1) routine habituation, 2) spontaneous habituation, 3) exemplary habituation, and 4) parental involvement. The role of parents in strengthening students' character is crucial. Likewise, the community plays a role as a monitoring and evaluation agent for the achievement of character education in the madrasa. Thus, the madrasa principal also shares leadership with community members and fosters good relationships with parents/guardians of students.

"...Outside the madrasa, we have a WhatsApp group forum for parents/guardians of students and their respective homeroom teachers..." (W3/KS/GPKN/NU07/4)

The smooth running of these habituation activities is supported by adequate facilities and infrastructure, such as a well-guarded madrasah fence with a gate to support the instillation of discipline, and a place of worship (mosque) to support the instillation of religious values. In this regard, the madrasah principal develops a strategic leadership model: 1) participatory community leadership, 2) religion-based, and 3) service-oriented. The implementation of extracurricular activities is directed at building student character through life skills, cultural skills, and skills education aligned with their talents and interests, in an effort to realize a national religious cultural character.

The results of student character education at MTs NU 07 can be divided into two categories: output and outcome.

"Achievements can be reported in the form of report cards, followed by records of results reports. For character-specific matters, each student is usually provided by the homeroom teacher with a personal student book..." (W3/KS/GPKN/NU07/5)

Evaluation results or outputs can be seen in affective assessments, report card grades, and counseling books. Meanwhile, outcomes, or the impact of character building, are evident in behaviors such as concern for cleanliness, beauty, and tidiness, adherence to religious services, discipline in accordance with regulations, mutual respect, politeness in speech, polite and familial behavior, honesty and responsibility, togetherness, neatness of documents and educational infrastructure, and active stakeholder participation. This is evident in interviews with the principal.

Strengthening character education aims to shape students' personalities through character education, the results of which are visible in concrete actions, namely good behavior, honesty, responsibility, respect for the rights of others, and hard work. Supporting factors for the implementation of character education policies at MTs NU 07 include facilities and infrastructure, teacher competence, cooperation from parents/guardians, a sound curriculum, and supervision by the principal.

The main facilities and infrastructure at MTs NU 07 that support the success of strengthening the character education of students are as follows: (1) a road in front of the madrasah that can be passed by cars, so it is very adequate for the madrasah community to pass, (2) a gate guarded by school security officers, (3) an entry and exit area for madrasah community members as well as a place for teacher representatives to greet by shaking hands when students arrive at the madrasah, (4) a corridor/terrace of the madrasah as a place to attach moral messages such as the vision and mission of the madrasah, and character values such as discipline and noble morals, (5) a madrasah garden equipped with trash cans that convey the message to care for and protect nature and the environment, (6) a village mosque close to the madrasah as a place of worship with students, (7) a madrasah yard that is used as a sports field and for ceremonies, (8) a parking area that is separate from the school environment, (9) rooms such as the head of the madrasah's room, teacher's room, administration room, counseling room (BP), classrooms, laboratories, libraries, ICT rooms, UKS rooms, OSIS/extracurricular, (10) canteen and cooperative located behind the madrasah, and (11) toilets in sufficient numbers and separate for teachers/employees and students. The existence of these madrasah facilities and infrastructure can shape character: discipline and obedience to social rules, care for the environment and society, appreciate achievement, responsibility, creativity, love of reading, curiosity, and friendliness.

Teachers are the main actors in the learning process. In the learning process at MTs NU 07 Patebon, teachers not only carry out the function of transferring knowledge but also function to instill values and build the character of students. Teachers are very influential in producing people who are principled, polite, intelligent in argumentation, and graceful in everyday life. Parents/guardians of students are very supportive of their children in character development at the madrasah and monitor the development of their children's academic abilities and monitor the development of personality that includes attitudes, morals and behavior of their children. Regular meetings with parents/guardians of students at MTs NU 07 Patebon are an important medium in fostering relationships to understand each other's activities at home and at the madrasah. Communication between parents and homeroom teachers is carried out to find out about their children's development at the madrasah. Temporary meetings such as during the commemoration of religious and national holidays, also serve as a forum for relationships between the school, parents/guardians of students, and the community (madrasah committee). The implementation of strengthening character education, besides being influenced by qualified teachers, is also very much determined by the curriculum used. The curriculum at MTs NU 07 Patebon is dynamically designed, both in classroom learning and in the madrasah environment. It accommodates global skills and is supported by the madrasah administration to help students absorb learning by fostering mutual respect and tolerance, fostering a peaceful life.

The character education development strategy is built through the supervision of the madrasah principal, employing a democratic leadership style that encourages subordinates to work together to achieve common goals. The principal of MTs NU 07 Patebon strengthens character education through various methods and media. In addition to serving as a role model, the Monday morning ceremony is a routine medium used to promote the madrasah's culture of noble character. Other media include monthly meetings at the madrasah, bimonthly meetings at teachers'/education staff's homes on a rotating basis, or temporary meetings as needed.

Factors that hinder the strengthening of character education for students at MTs NU 07 Patebon originate from (1) the students themselves, (2) the attitudes of educators, and (3) the environment. Students come to school with their own individual characters. A student's character is a product of their

innate potential, influenced by their environment, including family, community, playmates, mass media, and previous educational environments. The diversity of environments internalized within a person results in a choice process in developing character and behavior. Some teachers are also still not ready to implement character education programs at MTs NU 07 Patebon, focusing on academic achievement. Character education is still considered an additional activity, so its development is not carried out comprehensively in the curriculum. This has an impact on low awareness and understanding of the importance of character education among students. The culture of the surrounding community and playmates are also factors that greatly influence a child's character. The influence of social media in shaping a child's character is quite significant. Inappropriate and negative social media content can influence a child's character and trigger unhealthy attitudes and behavior.

The implementation of strengthening character education through the principal's leadership strategy can produce significant positive results for the entire school community. This can be seen in six aspects, as follows: student awareness of positive character values, a more harmonious and inclusive school atmosphere, student academic performance, closer and more supportive relationships between teachers and students, relationships between the school and families, and overall school achievement.

First, there is an increase in student awareness of positive character values. With a deeper understanding of the importance of morality and ethics in everyday life, students become more aware and tend to internalize these values in their behavior. Furthermore, the school atmosphere becomes more harmonious and inclusive. The implementation of leadership strategies that encourage character development creates an environment that supports students' personal and social development. Positive collaboration among students, appreciation for differences, and mutual respect are hallmarks of a learning environment strengthened by character education. The positive impact can also be felt in students' academic performance. Character education implemented through the principal's leadership not only impacts moral aspects but also contributes to improved discipline, learning motivation, and students' ability to focus on achieving better academic performance. Furthermore, the relationship between teachers and students becomes closer and more supportive. Principal leadership that prioritizes character building encourages collaboration between teachers and students in developing positive values. This creates an atmosphere where teachers are not only educators but also mentors and role models for students in understanding and implementing character values. Parental involvement in supporting character education becomes more evident, through participation in school activities, discussions about the values taught, and cooperation in supporting their children's character development. Ultimately, overall school performance can improve. Strengthening character education not only prepares students for academic success but also to become responsible citizens and contribute positively to society.

Discussion

The madrasah principal is the driving force that determines madrasah policy (Riski et al., 2021). Their performance must have a positive impact and bring about positive change in the madrasah's education system (Yuliana, 2021). In strengthening student character, the principal of MTs Negeri 2 Kendal plays a crucial role through planning, implementation, control, and evaluation. His vision and mission illustrate the development of student character. Character education at MTs Negeri 2 Kendal is embedded in all school activities and subjects, incorporating religious and moral values.

At MTs NU Patebon, the madrasah principal plays a role through planning, implementation, organization, and evaluation. Character education at MTs NU Patebon begins with introducing the vision and mission to teachers, educational staff, and students. The vision and mission of the madrasah contain character values, as stated by Kristanti (2022). The character values that will be developed in MTs NU Patebon students are: (1) Being accustomed to greeting, (2) Having a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect among students, (3) Having an honest attitude, (4) Having a polite attitude, and (5) Having concern for the environment. This description shows that the main role of the madrasah principal in strengthening student character is carried out through the formation of a positive madrasah culture by involving all members of the madrasah, as stated by Leithwood in Bush (2008). The role of the madrasah principal is not only limited to administrative tasks, but also involves guiding student character. In an effort to strengthen student character, the principal of MTs Negeri 2 Kendal includes character values in the curriculum, learning environment, teacher development, and community involvement. This is the same as what was said by Muslim (2021). Meanwhile, at MTs NU 07 Patebon, student character development strategies are implemented through modeling, punishment, and collaboration with parents and the community, where character values are integrated into the school curriculum. This aligns with research by Kadir et al. (2023).

Education is not only about transferring knowledge, but also about shaping character. The role of the madrasah principal as an educational leader is very important in creating a madrasah environment that supports the development of student character. The madrasah principal's strategy in strengthening student character is influenced by several factors involving various aspects of the madrasah environment, community, and individuals. These factors are supporting factors and inhibiting factors, as stated by Pridayani & Rivauzi (2022). Factors that support character strengthening at MTs Negeri 2 Kendal include: the madrasah environment, including teachers and education staff, family, community, technology, and social media learning. Meanwhile, factors inhibiting the strengthening of student character are: (1) lack of attention to character education. Some teachers still prioritize cognitive academics as student achievement, thus prioritizing character achievement, (2) the role of a less conducive social environment, and (3) students' economic factors. Meanwhile, at MTs NU Patebon, supporting factors for strengthening student character consist of facilities and infrastructure, teacher competence, activities of parents/guardians of students, a good curriculum, and supervision of the madrasah principal (Syarifuddin, 2023). Meanwhile, the inhibiting factors originate from students due to the influence of a less conducive environment, the attitudes of some educators who are less concerned with student character because they prioritize cognitive academic achievement, and inappropriate and negative online environments.

The results of the implementation of character strengthening for students at MTs Negeri 2 Kendal are: (1) Individuals who are qualified, responsible, and have a positive impact on society. (2) Attitudes of social concern and empathy. (3) Critical and analytical thinking skills. (4) Positive leadership attitudes. Meanwhile, at MTs NU Patebon, the results of strengthening student character are: (1) student awareness of positive character values, (2) the creation of a harmonious and inclusive school atmosphere, (3) optimization of student academic performance, (4) good relationships between teachers and students, (5) the development of good relationships between schools and families, and (6) increased school achievement. In general, discussions about the results of implementing madrasah principal strategies in strengthening student character can cover several aspects (Rachman et al., 2023), including leadership approaches, character development methods, and the impact of these strategies on students

and the madrasah environment. Madrasah principals who are successful in strengthening student character generally adopt an inspiring and empowering leadership model (Nurcahyo et al., 2024; Riana et al., 2023). They serve as role models for students and staff in ethical behavior, honesty, and responsibility. Principals are able to communicate clearly and effectively. This communication can create an environment that supports character development, communicates the school's values, and provides clear guidance.

Evaluation can show whether there are positive changes in student behavior and character. Improved discipline, cooperation, and responsibility are positive indicators. Successful implementation of a madrasah principal's strategies can create a more positive and supportive madrasah environment, influencing not only students but also teachers and staff (Riadi, 2016).

Conclusion

The leadership of madrasah principals at MTs N 2 Kendal and MTs NU 07 Patebon can play a key role in shaping a generation with strong Islamic moral and ethical values. Madrasah principals can design school policies and rules that are consistent with Islamic character values and create a safe and inclusive atmosphere. The findings cover three aspects:

The character values in both madrasahs are embedded in the madrasah's vision and mission. Therefore, strengthening student character begins with an introduction to the madrasah's vision and mission. Character values encompass religious and moral values. The strategy is implemented through modeling by teachers and educational staff, as well as collaboration between parents and the community. Student character building is integrated through curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities. In the curricular aspect, these character values are embedded in each subject. In the co-curricular aspect, character values are implemented through habits. In the extracurricular aspect, character values are embedded in activities such as scouting, Qiro'atul Qur'an, Red Cross (PMR), and Pencak Silat. Evaluation of student character building is conducted through two channels: output and outcome. In the output channel, student character building is carried out through affective assessments in report cards, while in the outcome channel, it is carried out through observations, such as caring behavior, polite speech, and discipline according to regulations.

Both madrasahs have relatively similar supporting and inhibiting factors. Supporting factors include: adequate facilities and infrastructure, professional teacher competence, well-developed collaboration with parents and the community, the creation of an Islamic and conducive madrasah culture, and the positive use of technology and social media. Inhibiting factors include: students carrying their own negative character traits, a lack of attention to character education by some teachers due to a prioritization of cognitive academic achievement, a less conducive social environment, and inappropriate and negative social media content.

Students' character building is achieved through two methods: output and outcome. The two madrasahs implement relatively similar outputs, namely through affective values in report cards. Outcomes are measured through observations, including: (a) Qualified, responsible individuals who have a positive impact on society. (b) A more harmonious and inclusive school atmosphere. (c) Good relationships between teachers, students, families, and the community.

This research was conducted at two madrasahs in Kendal Regency. This presents a limitation for the researchers, who selected two madrasahs with nearly identical characteristics. Although one is public

and the other is private, both are accredited A and both are affiliated with Islamic boarding schools. Therefore, to confirm these findings, future research could explore more than two educational institutions in different territories, or perhaps even institutions with different accreditations.

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