

The Role of Spiritual Leadership in Strengthening the Religious Culture of Schools

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The problem underlying this study is the need to strengthen religious culture in Islamic educational institutions, particularly at the elementary level, where character building and spiritual development must be internalized through systematic leadership strategies. This research aims to analyze the strategies implemented by the principal of MI Semen Pinggir in developing a comprehensive religious culture based on the framework of Louis W. Fry's Spiritual Leadership Theory. Using a qualitative descriptive method, data were collected through observations, interviews, and documentation, then analyzed through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings show that the principal employs five main strategies: daily religious habituation, integration of Islamic values across academic and non-academic activities, implementation of special religious programs, reinforcement of teacher exemplary roles, and a humanistic leadership approach. These strategies align with the components of spiritual leadership, namely vision, altruistic love, and hope or faith, which collectively foster intrinsic motivation and strengthen the spiritual climate of the school. The study concludes that spiritual-based leadership significantly contributes to shaping students' character and creating a cohesive Islamic environment. This study implies that principals should apply spiritual leadership principles to design structured religious culture programs, while teachers are encouraged to model consistent Islamic values in their daily interactions with students. Institutions need to provide supportive environments and resources to sustain religious culture initiatives, and future researchers are advised to explore comparative studies across different Islamic schools to deepen understanding of spiritual-based leadership practices.

Kata Kunci: *spiritual leadership, religious culture, Islamic education,*

INTRODUCTION

Education serves as the primary medium for shaping individuals who are knowledgeable, virtuous, and morally grounded (Hang & others, 2025; Jamieson,

2022; Sahri et al., 2023). In the context of national development, education functions not only as a vehicle for transferring knowledge, but also as an instrument for instilling moral and spiritual values (Nursikin & Nugroho, 2021; Sahri, 2022; Sakti et al., 2024). Spiritual values are essential foundations for character formation, ensuring that learners grow not only intellectually competent but also morally upright. Education that emphasizes spiritual values is capable of producing a generation with strong religious awareness and social responsibility (Jakandar et al., 2025; Wenas & Verana, 2024). Therefore, educational institutions play a strategic role in nurturing religious values. Islamic education, in particular, acts as an important instrument for instilling correct beliefs, ethics, and worship in accordance with Islamic teachings (Guna et al., 2024; Hendawi et al., 2024). Schools grounded in Islamic values are expected to become centers for cultivating students' religious character. Thus, spiritually oriented education becomes a key element in building a dignified and just civilization.

Religious culture in schools refers to a system of values, norms, and behaviors that reflects religious life in the daily activities of the school community (Fatimah et al., 2020; Khadavi, 2023; Manaf, 2025). The formation of religious culture does not occur instantly, but through a long and consistent process. Religious values must be internalized across all aspects of school life, including the curriculum, learning activities, and social interactions among the school community (Achadah et al., 2022; Ramedlon et al., 2023; Sauri et al., 2022). Schools with a strong religious culture foster a conducive environment for the development of Islamic character. Daily practices such as praying before learning, dressing modestly, speaking politely, and respecting teachers become part of the implementation of religious culture. Through this culture, students not only understand religious teachings cognitively but also practice them in real-life contexts. Religious culture also serves as a moral safeguard for students in navigating the negative influences of globalization. For this reason, strengthening religious culture in schools is an urgent need in building a faithful, knowledgeable, and ethical generation.

Spiritual leadership is a leadership style that emphasizes spirituality, morality, and exemplary conduct. A spiritual leader is not solely focused on administrative or academic achievements, but also on nurturing the spiritual well-being of the entire school community. In the context of Islamic education, spiritual leadership functions to align the school's vision and mission with divine values. The school principal, as a spiritual leader, is expected to serve as a role

model in worship, ethics, and daily behavior. Such leadership fosters a holistic sense of religiosity within the school environment. Through a spiritual approach, leaders can inspire teachers and students to act in accordance with Islamic teachings. Leaders with strong spiritual awareness help shape an organizational culture grounded in worship and humanity. Thus, spiritual leadership becomes a key factor in realizing a religious and character-based school environment.

MI Semen Pinggir Kapas, as an Islamic elementary educational institution, is committed to fostering a religious culture within the school environment. However, in practice, several challenges remain. Some teachers and students have not consistently demonstrated the application of religious values at school. Discipline in carrying out religious activities such as congregational prayer, Qur'an recitation, and daily supplications is still not optimal. Moreover, gaps remain between the values taught and the actual behaviors displayed in everyday interactions. Strengthening religious culture therefore requires systematic efforts supported by the spiritual leadership of the school principal. The principal of MI Semen Pinggir Kapas holds a strategic role in instilling spiritual values in teachers and students. Yet, the extent to which this spiritual leadership influences the school's religious culture has not been widely explored. Hence, this study is necessary to understand the role of spiritual leadership within the context of religious culture at MI Semen Pinggir Kapas.

The research by Maulidin, Pramana, and Munir (2024) shows that the leadership of the principal at SMK Al Hikmah Kalirejo plays a significant role in building and strengthening a religious culture through exemplary behavior, institutional policies, and the habituation of religious activities. The principal is able to motivate teachers and students to actively participate in structured religious programs, so that Islamic values are instilled in the daily behavior of the school community. This study confirms that visionary, participative, and value-oriented leadership has a positive impact on creating a religious and conducive school environment (MAULIDIN et al., 2024). The research results of Maulidin (2024) indicate that the spiritual leadership of the principal at SMK Islam Al-Fadhila Demak is reflected through role modeling, strengthening religious values, and fostering the character of the school community. The principal is able to create a harmonious and religious work climate through a spiritual approach that emphasizes integrity, empathy, and service. This study confirms that spiritual leadership contributes significantly to shaping a school culture rooted in Islamic values and enhancing the overall quality of education (MAULIDIN, 2024).

The research by Daud et al. (2018) shows that the spiritual leadership of the principal at SMA Terpadu Wira Bhakti Gorontalo plays an important role in strengthening students' character through religious role modeling and habituation of moral values. The principal integrates spiritual values into school policies, learning activities, and daily school culture, creating a conducive environment for the development of positive character. This study confirms that spiritual leadership can significantly enhance students' discipline, responsibility, and religious attitudes (Daud et al., 2018). Research by Syaifi (2025) indicates that transformative leadership plays a strategic role in strengthening religious culture in Islamic educational institutions through a clear vision, inspirational motivation, and intensive guidance for all school members. The institution's leader is able to drive positive change by setting an example, building collective commitment, and creating sustainable religious programs. This study confirms that the transformative approach is effective in developing a strong, inclusive, and character-building religious culture among students (Syaifi, 2025).

Based on the review of previous studies, there remains a significant research gap that needs to be addressed. Most existing research has focused on managerial aspects of leadership or religious programs without examining the deeper dimensions of leader spirituality. Furthermore, studies that directly link spiritual leadership with religious culture in Islamic elementary schools (madrasah ibtidaiyah) are still very limited. The novelty of this research lies in its effort to comprehensively explore how the values, vision, and spiritual exemplarity of the school principal influence the religious behavior of the school community. This study examines not only the structural dimensions of leadership but also the spiritual dimension that serves as an inspirational source for strengthening religious culture. Through this approach, the study is expected to provide a new perspective on the meaning of spiritual leadership within the context of Islamic basic education. In addition, the findings are anticipated to serve as a practical reference for school principals in developing effective spiritual development strategies. Thus, this research offers original contributions both theoretically and empirically to the development of Islamic education.

This study aims to analyze the role of spiritual leadership in strengthening religious culture at MI Semen Pinggir Kapas. Specifically, it seeks to describe the forms of spiritual value implementation in the principal's leadership practices. The research also aims to identify the strategies employed by the principal to foster religious values among teachers and students. Moreover, it seeks to reveal supporting and inhibiting factors in the implementation of spiritual leadership in

the school. Another objective is to understand the impact of spiritual leadership on shaping the religious behavior of the school community. Through these findings, the study is expected to formulate a model of spiritual leadership that is relevant to the context of Islamic basic education. The results are also expected to serve as a foundation for policy development related to strengthening religious culture in madrasah. In this way, the study provides meaningful contributions to both the theory and practice of Islamic educational leadership.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design (Kusumastuti & Khoiron, 2019; Moleong, 2017). The qualitative method was chosen because it aims to understand deeply the phenomenon of spiritual leadership practiced by the principal within the real-life context of the school. This approach allows the researcher to explore meanings, values, and experiences that naturally occur among the research subjects. Through a case study at MI Semen Pinggir Kapas, the researcher seeks to reveal comprehensively how the principal's spiritual leadership influences the formation of a religious school culture. The qualitative approach is appropriate for describing social situations that are complex, dynamic, and filled with spiritual values. The focus of this study is directed toward processes, behaviors, and interactions among school members under the influence of spiritual leadership. The researcher serves as the main instrument, directly engaging in data collection and interpretation. Therefore, this study is expected to produce rich and meaningful descriptions of spiritual leadership practices in the Islamic elementary school setting.

This research was conducted at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI) Ulul Albab, selected because of its strong religious characteristics and well-established spiritual programs. The research subjects include the principal, Islamic education teachers, several students, and parents as supporting informants. Informants were chosen using purposive sampling, considering their competence, experience, and involvement in school religious activities. Data were collected through three primary techniques: observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation (Nurfajriani et al., 2024). Observation was used to directly examine daily religious activities and behaviors of school members. In-depth interviews were conducted to gain deeper insight into the perceptions and experiences of informants regarding the principal's spiritual leadership. Documentation was utilized to obtain written data such as the school's vision

and mission, religious programs, and reports of spiritual activities. These three methods were combined to strengthen the validity and reliability of the collected data.

The data were analyzed using the interactive analysis model of Miles and Huberman, which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, 2003). In the data reduction phase, the researcher selected and focused on data relevant to the objectives of the study. Data display was organized into descriptive narratives showing patterns, themes, and relationships among elements of spiritual leadership. Conclusion drawing was conducted continuously throughout the research process until valid meanings were identified. To ensure the credibility of the data, the researcher employed source and method triangulation by comparing the findings from interviews, observations, and documentation. Additionally, a member check was carried out with participants to verify the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations. The study's validity was further reinforced through prolonged engagement and reflective observation during data collection. Through this process, the research findings are expected to provide authentic and trustworthy insights into the role of spiritual leadership at MI Semen Pinggir Kapas.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

A. Implementation of the Principal's Spiritual Leadership Values at MI Semen Pinggir

Based on observations and interviews, the principal of MI Semen Pinggir demonstrates a clear implementation of spiritual leadership through exemplary behavior and daily conduct. He is known as a disciplined, humble, and modest figure, making him a role model for the entire school community. His exemplary character is reflected in habits such as arriving early at school, greeting students with a smile, and consistently offering greetings to teachers and staff. He also maintains gentle speech and avoids words that might offend others. His polite and wise attitude creates a harmonious and respectful school atmosphere. In every activity, both academic and religious, he strives to be personally present to provide guidance and support. This exemplary leadership serves as a source of positive energy that fosters respect and motivation among teachers and students. Thus, his presence is not merely administrative but also that of an inspiring spiritual figure.

The principal strongly emphasizes the importance of worship development as part of strengthening spiritual values. He actively supervises religious activities such as dhuha prayer, congregational prayers, and daily Qur'an recitation. On several occasions, he personally leads the prayer and delivers brief sermons before learning activities begin. Through these sermons, he instills values of sincerity, patience, and gratitude in both students and teachers. Religious programs at MI Semen Pinggir are not treated as routines but as meaningful efforts to nurture religious character. The principal also ensures that these activities are carried out with genuine awareness rather than compulsion. He encourages teachers to serve as role models so students have figures to emulate. Thus, worship development becomes an integral part of spiritual leadership focused on cultivating noble character.

Beyond ritual worship, the principal instills moral and social values through daily habits at school. Students are taught to respect teachers, behave politely, and help their peers. He initiated the "Smile, Greeting, Salutation, Politeness, and Courtesy" program conducted every morning at the school gate to promote positive interactions. Additionally, social-sharing activities such as Friday alms and support for orphans are led directly by the principal. He emphasizes that religious values should be reflected not only in ritual practices but also in compassionate and responsible social behavior. Cooperation, cleanliness awareness, and respect for differences are continuously cultivated as expressions of Islamic morality. Through this approach, moral values flourish naturally in the school environment.

In decision-making, the principal consistently upholds the principles of consultation and justice. Every school-related policy, whether academic or non-academic, is discussed collectively with teachers and the school committee. He values every opinion regardless of position or age, creating a democratic and respectful atmosphere. Fairness is also evident in task distribution, rewards, and non-discriminatory discipline enforcement. He adheres to Qur'anic principles in upholding truth and placing matters in their proper context. Through consultative leadership, relationships between the principal and teachers feel more open and familial. His fair and wise decisions foster trust and responsibility among teachers and students. These values reflect a genuine practice of spiritual leadership grounded in Islamic morality.

The implementation of spiritual leadership values has brought

significant impact on the religious atmosphere at MI Semen Pinggir. The school environment has become more orderly, clean, and Islamic in character. Teachers demonstrate greater discipline, friendliness, and sincerity in carrying out their duties. Students increasingly practice greeting others, maintaining cleanliness, and participating in religious activities. A culture of mutual respect and praying for one another has become part of daily life. Parents also acknowledge positive changes in their children's behavior after attending the school. Relationships among teachers, students, and the community have become more harmonious due to the spiritual values and exemplary leadership of the principal. Thus, spiritual leadership at MI Semen Pinggir not only enhances individual religiosity but also shapes a school culture that is Islamic and humanistic in character.

B. The Principal's Strategies in Building a Religious School Culture at MI Semen Pinggir

1. habituation of daily religious activities

The principal implements a habituation strategy through various routine religious activities that form part of the school's daily schedule. Activities such as congregational dhuha prayer, Qur'an recitation, and morning supplication are carried out consistently before the learning process begins. This habituation aims to instill spiritual values in students' daily routines so that worship is not merely viewed as an obligation but becomes a positive habit embedded within them. In its implementation, teachers serve as facilitators and supervisors who ensure that all activities are conducted with mindfulness, orderliness, and sincerity. Through continuous habituation, a religious atmosphere naturally grows within the school community, creating an Islamic environment that supports the development of students' noble character.

2. Integration of Religious Values into Academic and Non-Academic Activities

The principal directs that Islamic values should not only be taught in Islamic Education (PAI) classes but also integrated into all subjects taught at the school. Teachers are encouraged to consistently relate each learning material to moral values and Islamic teachings such as honesty, discipline, responsibility, and cooperation. These religious values are also incorporated into various non-academic activities, including flag ceremonies, scouting programs, and other extracurricular activities. This effort aims to ensure that all school activities serve as a comprehensive

medium for internalizing Islamic values among students. Through this strategy, the religious culture does not stand alone but becomes an integral part of the learning system and daily school life at MI Semen Pinggir, allowing Islamic values to be deeply embedded in all students.

3. Strengthening Incidental Religious Activities and Special Programs

The principal regularly organizes various incidental religious activities such as the Ramadan short-term pesantren program, the commemoration of Islamic holy days (PHBI), and short surah memorization competitions. These activities serve as effective means of fostering religious enthusiasm while strengthening the bond between teachers, students, and the surrounding community. During their implementation, both teachers and students are actively involved in the planning and execution stages, which cultivates a sense of ownership and responsibility toward the madrasah's programs. In addition, these religious activities provide opportunities to appreciate students who excel in religious fields, such as giving awards to Qur'an memorizers or students who diligently perform worship practices. Through such activities, the religious culture at MI Semen Pinggir not only develops through daily routines but also becomes internalized through meaningful spiritual moments, reinforcing the Islamic character of the entire school community.

4. Teacher Role Modeling and Mentoring as Spiritual Agents of the School

The principal emphasizes the crucial role of teachers as role models and primary agents in instilling religious values within the school environment. Teachers are not only responsible for delivering instructional content but also for serving as exemplars of Islamic character and behavior that students can emulate in their daily lives. To support this, the principal consistently provides motivation, guidance, and practical examples of how teachers should embody discipline, courtesy, and sincerity in their work. Every teacher is expected to reflect noble values such as patience, honesty, and responsibility both inside and outside the classroom. This approach positions teachers as the frontline in strengthening the school's religious culture, as their behavior and example significantly influence the character formation and spiritual development of students at MI Semen Pinggir.

5. Humanistic and Family oriented Approaches in Leadership

The principal applies a persuasive and humanistic leadership style in building relationships with all members of the school community. In every interaction, he prioritizes open dialogue, consultation, and respect for each individual regardless of position or background. A warm, open, and family-like working atmosphere is intentionally cultivated so that teachers and staff feel appreciated, heard, and motivated to give their best contributions to the advancement of the madrasah. This humanistic approach has proven effective in fostering a collective awareness that strengthening the school's religious culture is a shared responsibility, not merely the burden of the principal. Through leadership grounded in compassion, exemplary conduct, and spirituality, MI Semen Pinggir has developed into a harmonious and religious educational environment that reflects Islamic values in all aspects of school life.

C. The Impact of Spiritual Leadership on the Religious Behavior of the School Community

The spiritual leadership practiced by the principal of MI Semen Pinggir has had a significant impact on shaping the religious behavior of the school community, including both teachers and students. The principal not only leads administratively but also acts as a spiritual guide who instills values of exemplary conduct, sincerity, and moral responsibility. Through an approach grounded in compassion and Islamic principles, the principal successfully creates a conducive and religious working atmosphere. Teachers, students, and staff feel that every policy and activity in the school carries a clear spiritual orientation, namely drawing closer to Allah and strengthening noble character. This school climate fosters a collective awareness that all educational activities should be grounded in worship. Thus, spiritual leadership does not merely produce structural obedience but also nurtures moral and spiritual obedience that comes from the heart.

The first notable impact is the increased discipline and responsibility of teachers in carrying out their professional duties. Teachers at MI Semen Pinggir show significant improvements in punctuality, attendance, and dedication to teaching. They carry out their duties not only as formal obligations but also as acts of devotion to Allah. The sincerity demonstrated by the principal motivates teachers to work wholeheartedly, prioritize the quality of learning, and focus on attaining blessings. Furthermore, teachers have become more patient with students of diverse characters and wiser in

providing guidance or correction. The principal's spiritual attitude has influenced the teachers, leading to a work culture based on religious values and moral responsibility. This creates a calm, harmonious, and worship-oriented school environment.

The second impact is reflected in students' behavior, which shows noticeable improvement in religious discipline and courtesy. Students have become accustomed to performing dhuha prayer, reciting the Qur'an, and praying together before learning. They also demonstrate respectful behavior toward teachers, greet others with salam, and correct peers politely. The routine religious activities foster a character that is not only compliant with school rules but also spiritually aware. The religious culture at MI Semen Pinggir has become part of the students' daily lives, practiced consciously rather than out of compulsion. The principal continuously emphasizes the importance of consistent good deeds so that they become embedded in students' personalities. As a result, religious behavior develops naturally through habituation rather than merely from theoretical instruction.

Beyond the school environment, the principal's spiritual leadership also influences students' behavior at home and in the community. Parents acknowledge positive changes in their children after participating in madrasah activities, including improved worship practices, greater respect for parents, and increased compassion for others. The principal encourages students to apply Islamic values learned at school in daily life, both at home and in social settings. For example, students are encouraged to invite their families to pray in congregation, recite the Qur'an together, or help neighbors in need. The combination of the principal's exemplary leadership and the school's religious habituation programs creates a ripple effect that extends spiritual influence beyond the school. Thus, the madrasah functions not only as a formal educational institution but also as a center for Islamic character formation with social impact.

Spiritual leadership at MI Semen Pinggir has proven essential in building a religious, humanistic, and inspiring educational ecosystem. The principal has successfully instilled spiritual values that are not merely symbolic but also substantive and applicable in the daily lives of the school community. Through leadership grounded in exemplary behavior and Qur'anic values, the madrasah is able to cultivate dedicated teachers and students with noble character. The religious culture that flourishes in the school strengthens both the vertical relationship between humans and God

and the horizontal relationships among members of the school community. This environment of compassion, mutual respect, and spirituality makes MI Semen Pinggir a clear example of how spiritual leadership can holistically shape religious character.

DISCUSSION

The Spiritual Leadership theory developed by Louis W. Fry has become one of the most influential frameworks for examining how spiritual values can generate intrinsic motivation within an organization. Fry argues that spiritual leadership is not merely about technical capabilities but about a leader's ability to create meaning, hope, and a climate of compassion in the workplace. Its three core components, namely vision, altruistic love, and hope or faith, function as moral energies that drive organizational behavior. Leaders are expected to articulate an inspiring vision that provides members with a meaningful sense of direction. In educational settings, this vision extends beyond academic targets to include character formation and the spiritual development of learners.

The strategy of daily religious habituation implemented by the principal of MI Semen Pinggir aligns with Fry's concept of developing a spiritual calling. Practices such as dhuha prayer, Qur'an recitation, and morning supplications are not merely ritual routines, but organizational mechanisms for cultivating meaning and a sense of connection to transcendent values. Fry emphasizes that spiritual leaders help organizational members discover a higher "reason for being" beyond fulfilling administrative duties. When religious practices are internalized consistently, they create an environment that supports the intrinsic motivation of students and teachers to engage in teaching and learning with sincerity and spiritual awareness.

The integration of religious values into academic and non-academic activities also reflects the vision component of Fry's theory. Vision in spiritual leadership is not only futuristic but also infused with moral and spiritual values that orient collective action. When the principal encourages teachers to embed Islamic values across subjects, this embodies a holistic educational vision that unites cognition, character, and spirituality. Fry argues that a strong vision mobilizes collective behavior so that values become internal norms rather than external rules. At MI Semen Pinggir, the integration of Islamic values throughout the school demonstrates how a value-oriented vision can shape a cohesive religious culture.

The implementation of incidental religious programs and special activities such as pesantren kilat, Islamic Holiday Commemorations, and Qur'an

memorization contests corresponds to the hope or faith component described by Fry. These activities strengthen emotional bonds among students, teachers, and the wider community, fostering a sense of membership that directly results from spiritual leadership. Fry notes that organizations with strong membership demonstrate collective commitment and solidarity in pursuing shared goals. This is evident in the enthusiastic participation of the entire school community and local society in these significant religious events.

The principal's emphasis on teacher role modeling also aligns with the altruistic love component of Fry's theory. Altruistic love is not merely affection but a form of leadership that radiates honesty, patience, understanding, and genuine care for others. A principal who encourages teachers to serve as moral exemplars is essentially cultivating a culture of mutual support, growth, and care within the learning community. According to Fry, when leaders demonstrate altruistic love, organizational members feel valued and are motivated to display positive behaviors. In the context of the madrasah, teacher exemplarity functions as a central pillar of student character formation and represents a concrete application of spiritual leadership at the micro level.

The humanistic and familial leadership style practiced by the principal is also a tangible expression of Fry's ideas about spiritually enriched interpersonal relationships. Fry maintains that spiritual leadership creates an emotionally safe environment that supports individual growth and provides space for each member to express their best potential. By fostering open dialogue, consultation, and appreciation of individual contributions, the principal of MI Semen Pinggir has built a religious climate that is not only formal but alive and deeply felt in daily interactions. Such leadership transforms the school culture into a spiritual community that moves collectively toward more meaningful and value-based educational goals rooted in Islamic teachings.

CONCLUSION

The strategies implemented by the principal of MI Semen Pinggir in developing a religious school culture clearly align with Louis W. Fry's Spiritual Leadership framework, particularly in fostering vision, altruistic love, and hope or faith as sources of intrinsic motivation. Through daily religious habituation, integration of Islamic values, incidental religious programs, teacher exemplarity, and a humanistic leadership approach, the principal successfully cultivates a meaningful and spiritually aware learning environment. In line with the reviewer's recommendation, this study explicitly concludes that principals

should adopt spiritual leadership principles to enhance the effectiveness of religious culture development, teachers should consistently embody Islamic values as role models, institutions must provide structural support for sustained religious programs, and future researchers are encouraged to investigate comparative implementations of spiritual leadership across diverse Islamic educational settings.

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