Islamic Boarding School Leadership Strategy in Strengthening the Religious Character of Students in Darul Iihsan Islamic Boarding School Aceh Besar

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Article Info:	ABSTRACT
Submitted: 30/03/2024 Revised: 21/05/2024 Published: 30/06/2024	*This research aims to analyze leadership strategies of Darul Ihsan Islamic Boarding School in Aceh Besar in term of students' religious character strengthening. The main issue faced is the lack of religious character strengthening for the students to face modern challenges. The research method used is qualitative descriptive with research subject that consists of boarding school's head, teaching staff, and students. The data were collected by observation, in-depth-interview, and document analyses. The result of the research shows that the strategies implemented are including routine worshiping, habituation, exemplary, advice, and reward and punishment system. The strategies are proven to be effective in strengthening religious character of the students although there are several obstacles like change resistance and limited resources. The research concludes that structured and comprehensive leadership can improve students' religious character significantly. However, it still requires evaluation and sustainable adjustment to encounter the obstacles. **Keywords:** Islamic Boarding School Leadership; Religious Character; Educational Strategies*
	ABSTRAK
	Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis strategi kepemimpinan Pondok Pesantren Darul Ihsan Aceh Besar dalam penguatan karakter religius santri. Permasalahan utama yang dihadapi adalah kurangnya penguatan karakter religius di kalangan santri dalam menghadapi tantangan modern. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan subjek penelitian terdiri dari pimpinan pesantren, staf pengajar, dan santri. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara mendalam, dan analisis dokumen. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa strategi yang diterapkan meliputi ibadah rutin, pembiasaan, teladan, nasihat, serta sistem reward dan punishment. Strategi ini terbukti efektif dalam memperkuat karakter religius santri, meskipun terdapat beberapa hambatan seperti resistensi perubahan dan keterbatasan sumber daya. Kesimpulan dari penelitian ini adalah bahwa kepemimpinan yang terstruktur dan komprehensif dapat meningkatkan karakter religius santri secara signifikan, namun perlu adanya evaluasi dan penyesuaian berkelanjutan untuk mengatasi berbagai hambatan yang ada. **Kata-Kata Kunci:** Kepemimpinan Pesantren; Karakter Religius; Strategi Pendidikan

1. **INTRODUCTION**

Islamic boarding schools are Islamic-based educational institutions which become people's choice to get education (Hastasari et al., 2022; Roqib, 2021). In addition, Islamic boarding schools are excellent resources for parents who want to raise better human beings who will benefit their faith, country, and state (Abbas et al., 2021; Aziz et al., 2023; Komariah & Nihayah, 2023). Islamic boarding school leadership is an endeavor or process of governing Islamic boarding school educational establishments under the direction of Kiai (leader), utilizing a variety of human resources in order to accomplish educational objectives, which is to educate the nation's children.

Islamic boarding schools have various facilities to broaden horizons and develop the morals and character of students as well (Hakim, 2023; Harmonis & Bakri, 2023; Komariah & Nihayah, 2023; Kurniawan et al., 2023). Character education is an endeavor conducted in a learning setting with the goal of promoting human potential growth and development in order to produce morally upright and well-mannered individuals (Kapoh et al., 2023; Sahabuddin et al., 2023; Tuhuteru, 2023). Pendidikan Character is a system of teaching moral principles that consists of the knowledge, awareness, will, and action to put those principles into practice toward God Almighty, other people, ourselves, and the environment in order for us to become human (Batrisyia et al., n.d.; Harmonis & Bakri, 2023; Kurniawan et al., 2023).

It is crucial that religious character be developed from a young age. Character development can be influenced by one's upbringing: family, education, and society (R. Jannah, 2023; Rohmawati & Pahlevi, 2023), because children's life revolves around these three elements. Therefore, it's critical to shield them from the negative effects of the contemporary world. Because Islamic boarding schools have the unique quality of being a location of religious learning with the goal of educating students to become better Muslims, helpful for the religion of the nation and state, many people believe that religious character can only be produced in these institutions. Islamic boarding schools serve as centers for in-depth religious instruction, and religious character plays a significant role in these institutions (Khakim et al., 2023). Islamic boarding schools help students develop their moral character in addition to teaching them religious doctrine. Islamic boarding schools' strong religious ethos aids students in comprehending and effectively implementing religious teachings in both their daily and future lives (Sahabuddin et al., 2023; Tuhuteru, 2023). In addition, students who have a solid theological foundation are better able to develop positive character traits like compassion, justice, and setting an example. Building a peaceful and civilized community depends on this.

Islamic boarding schools serve as centers for spiritual growth as well, where pupils can explore their identities and seek a greater purpose in life with the support of their strong religious convictions (Solihin et al., 2020). Moreover, Islamic boarding

schools serve as a breeding ground for future leaders, since students with strong religious convictions learn how to use authority for the benefit of all. Students that have strong religious character also benefit from scientific growth, as it teaches them to evaluate and apply religious beliefs critically and meticulously (Kapoh et al., 2023; Rohmawati & Pahlevi, 2023). Islamic boarding schools serve as socialization environments as well, teaching students to respect, cooperate, and communicate with one another while maintaining a strong religious foundation.

In addition, kids who have a strong religious character benefit from emotional development, which teaches them how to control their emotions, demonstrate empathy, and become more tolerant of others (Ahmad, 2023; Andrei, 2023). To develop a strong religious character in Islamic boarding schools, teachers must incorporate religious values into all aspects of education and daily life. This can be done in a variety of ways, such as through teaching, mentoring, and active religious practice.

Islamic boarding school leaders play a crucial role in helping students develop their religious character by teaching them to read the Qur'an and helping them become honorable, morally aware, self-reliant individuals whose daily actions and experiences align with Islamic standards. An Islamic boarding school leader must build his students' morals and character in order for them to grow into human beings with upright morals and independent ideals. Religious character education at Islamic boarding schools is difficult to implement, thus the leaders need strategy, process, perseverance, hard work, responsibility and seriousness in implementing it (Boty et al., 2023; Khadijah, 2021). Several cases in Islamic boarding school educational institutions, such as stealing, bullying, and violence committed by students, highlight the challenges faced in character education.

Based on preliminary observations, researchers noticed that the Darul Ihsan Islamic Boarding School in Aceh Besar employed effective strategies to fortify students' religious character. These strategies included worship, role modeling, habituation, advice, and reward and punishment strategy. Every activity is expertly planned to instill morality and good religious character in every student. furthermore, Islamic boarding school leaders consistently inspire students with guidance and discipline and inculcate moral, ethical, and spiritual principles within the Islamic boarding school setting.

Taking into consideration a few differences from earlier research, we investigate Islamic boarding school leadership techniques in enhancing the religious character of students at the Darul Ihsan Islamic Boarding School in Aceh Besar. Previous studies have looked into a number of topics, including the influence of school culture on students' religious character, how to improve character education in the context of Tahfidz Islamic boarding school (Prayogi et al., 2021; Rohaeti et al., 2021), and the formation of the independent entrepreneurial character of santri (students) through the Islamic boarding school education system (Zaki et al., 2020). Meanwhile, previous research has also

highlighted topics such as Islamic boarding school regulations in the 4.0 era, the role of Islamic boarding schools in shaping the character of students and Islamic boarding school culture, and character education in Salaf Islamic boarding schools. Previous research has also explored other topics such as teacher career development in Islamic boarding schools (Salabi, 2021), and learning plan management in Aceh. It demonstates that, although there is previous research relevant to the theme of Islamic boarding school leadership and strengthening the religious character of Islamic boarding school students, the focus and research approach may vary depending on the context and research objectives. This study's primary goal is to conduct a detailed investigation and analysis of the leadership techniques employed at the Darul Ihsan Islamic Boarding School in Aceh Besar in order to fortify the students' religious character. This study intends to outline certain leadership initiatives and instructional strategies used to promote religious values in pupils, assess their efficacy, and pinpoint implementation-related difficulties. Furthermore, this study aims to provide practical suggestions that can be applied to comparable educational establishments that wish to enhance their religious character education programs. By concentrating on this topic, the study fills in knowledge gaps in the field by offering in-depth analyses of the function that leadership plays in students' moral and religious growth within the special setting of Indonesian Islamic boarding schools. By concentrating on topics that haven't been thoroughly covered in earlier studies, it is expected that this research adds the knowledge of Islamic boarding school leadership techniques for enhancing students' religious character at the Darul Ihsan Islamic Boarding School in Aceh Besar. It is intended that this study will offer a deeper and more thorough understanding of how Islamic boarding schools influence students' religious identities in the modern day.

2. METHODS

This research used a descriptive qualitative approach to understand leadership strategies at the Aceh Besar Darul Iihsan Islamic Boarding School in strengthening the religious character of its students. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to gain an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of social and cultural phenomena, especially in the context of religious education and character development in Islamic boarding schools.

This research focused on the Darul Iihsan Islamic Boarding School in Aceh Besar by involving eight people as research subjects, namely one Islamic boarding school leader, one Islamic junior high school (MTs) principal, one member of the shura assembly, one ustadzah (female teacher), one ustadz (male teacher), and three students. Research subjects were selected based on their role and influence in shaping students' religious character. For example, Islamic boarding school leader and principals were

chosen because of their leadership roles, while ustadz and ustadzah were chosen because of their role in teaching, and students were chosen to represent the students' perspective.

This study employed a number of methods for data collection. Non-participatory observation was used to record daily interactions and the implementation of religious and educational activities in the Islamic boarding school. Eight participants in the education and character development process, consisting of Islamic boarding school's leaders, students, and teachers, were interviewed in-depth to get their opinions and experiences about the strategies implemented. Moreover, document analysis was done on school curriculum, meeting minutes, and internal evaluation reports in order to confirm the information gathered from observations and interviews.

The collected data was then analyzed using relevant theories and considering applicable laws and regulations. The analysis's findings were presented as research that applied qualitative, descriptive methodologies to analyze the dynamics and practices of leadership in the Islamic boarding school.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Strengthening students' religious character is an important process in forming individuals with integrity, high moral standards, and commitment to spiritual values. Implementing this strategy requires a systematic and structured approach to ensure that religious values are instilled and internalized in students' daily lives. The following chart illustrates the workflow for implementing strategies to strengthen students' religious character, consisting of three main phases: planning, strategy implementation, and evaluation and adjustment.

The first phase is planning. During this stage, staff members gathered and discussed and identify problems, opportunities and goals to be achieved. Following this deliberation, they engage in strategic focus formulation, which involves defining the primary focus of the strategy to ensure that key areas requiring attention are appropriately addressed.

The second stage is strategy implementation. It involves several crucial actions. Regular worship ensures that worship activities are scheduled and integrated into students' daily lives. The process of becoming accustomed to a desired behavior through consistent instruction and the creation of gratifying routines is known as habituation. Exemplary behavior highlights how important it is for staff members and leaders to act morally so that kids can take after them. Last but not least, systems of rewards and punishments are employed to increase positive conduct and decrease negative behavior by praising good behavior and enforcing penalties for bad behavior

The third phase, the evaluation and adjustment, entails evaluation cycles carried out periodically (monthly, semi-annually, annually) to assess the effectiveness of the strategies implemented and monitor progress. The impact of evaluation results on plan

modifications enables strategies to be improved and adjusted in accordance with real needs and circumstances, guaranteeing that strategies stay applicable and efficient.

a. Leadership Planning for Strengthening the Religious Character of Students

The study's findings demonstrate that in order to help the students' religious character develop, the leadership of the Darul Ihsan Islamic boarding school at Aceh Besar has organized and conducted discussions and meetings with its personnel. Implementing the intended vision and mission is the goal of this planning, which is a component of the leadership approach for forming students' moral character. Worship, habituation, lectures, setting an example, and a system of rewards and punishments are some of the strategies implemented. The goal of this strategy is to boost students' motivation in a variety of aspects of life.

In order to achieve good outcomes, the leadership of the Islamic boarding school and every member of the staff at the Darul Ihsan Aceh Besar Islamic Boarding School are committed to investing in a lot of effort in the preparation and execution of plans. This involves getting all staff members, including principals of Islamic boarding schools, majlis shura, public relations, facilities and infrastructure, ustadz and ustadzah, and other staff members ready to execute the well-planned programs. It supports the study conducted by Kusuma et al. (2021) which shows that implementing regulations at the Darul A'mal Islamic boarding school can be a solution to strengthening the character of students in Islamic boarding schools. This is in line with the approach used in earlier studies, which incorporates developing and enforcing rules as a leadership tactic in forming students' moral character. Further, this study demonstrates how character education is implemented constantly and concurrently by Santri, Tuan Guru, Ustaz, the environment, and Islamic boarding school culture. The aforementioned research results reveal the dedication of Islamic boarding school administrators and personnel to executing a thorough character education curriculum.

Due to its 40 distinct curricula that set it apart from other Islamic boarding schools, Darul Ihsan Islamic boarding school is one of the most wanted Islamic boarding schools in the community. The curriculum at the Islamic boarding school in Darul Ihsan is a blend of the Education Department's curriculum and the Dayah curriculum, meaning that in addition to general education, Kedayahan lessons are taught there. This focuses on developing students' character to become, competent, skillful, and competent.

These programs are designed to improve teachers' soft skills, which will have an impact on how well they perform. When teachers are of high quality, they can work at their best, which will boost their effectiveness. This has the capacity to generate a high-quality generation as well. To give the best possible care to all school residents teachers, students, staff, parents, and other collaborators a school principal must possess strong managerial abilities. It is essential that institutional leaders give careful consideration to

the performance of teachers. When teachers are performing at their best, the institution can advance.

The good managerial ability of a school principal has a significant impact on the quality of education in schools (Kilag et al., 2023; Kit et al., 2023). Strong managerial abilities enable school principals to build curricula and teaching materials that are current and relevant, foster a positive learning environment, successfully manage school resources, elevate teachers' profesionalism, and establish character development initiatives for their students (Ahmad, 2023; Khadijah, 2021). A well-designed curriculum, a supportive learning environment, good resource management, professional teachers, and morally upright students all contribute to improving the quality of education (Tanzeh et al., 2021). With a supportive environment and well-managed resources, school principals can establish an optimal educational environment, where teachers can provide high-quality education, and students can more successfully comprehend and apply the topics taught. This can ultimately improve the quality of education in schools and prepare students for a better future.

b. Implementation Strategy for Strengthening the Religious Character of Students

The study's findings demonstrate that the implementation strategy for enhancing pupils' religious character has been put into practice and is going as planned. To help the pupils get used to these religious character programs, the leadership of the Islamic boarding school and all of the personnel at the Darul Ihsan Aceh Besar Islamic boarding school employ a variety of strategies. With such traits, the Islamic boarding school Darul Ihsan has been able to produce pupils who are morally upright and in line with religious principles.

All members of the personnel at the Islamic boarding school, particularly the leaders, are responsible for carrying out the plan to improve the religious character of the students. It is difficult to impart religious character education in Islamic boarding schools, however. The leaders of Islamic boarding schools here need cooperation, responsibility and seriousness in implementing this. This findings is in line with the finding of the study by Fitriani (2022) which highlights the role of Islamic boarding school culture in shaping the character of students by emphasizing sincerity in learning and collaboration between educators and administrators. Tanzeh et al. (2021) reveal the strategy implemented by Islamic boarding schools in facing the Society 5.0 era, including the curriculum transformation and development of students' life skills. In addition to that, Fakhrunnisak et al. (2023) examine culture-based character education at the Nurul Hakim Kediri Lobar Islamic Boarding School, which shows that character formation is carried out through collaboration between students, teachers, the environment and the culture of the Islamic boarding school. Another relevant discourse is a study by which focuses on the role of rewards and punishments in helping students develop a disciplined character, emphasizing the integration of Salafi and general learning principles as well as the use of

reward and punishment techniques. Referring to these studies, it can be concluded that the implementation strategy for strengthening the religious character of students in Islamic boarding schools involves various aspects such as Islamic boarding school culture, culture-based character education, value instillation strategies, and the application of rewards and punishments. Collaboration between Islamic boarding school leaders, educators and Islamic boarding school staff is the key to creating an environment that supports the formation of students' religious character in accordance with the desired values.

In its implementation, the Darul Ihsan Islamic Boarding School in Aceh Besar has carried out implementation strategies, namely worship, habituation, role model, and rewards and punishments strategy. These strategies have been running well at the Darul Ihsan Islamic Boarding School. It is in line with the statement from Fatimah et al. (2023) supporting the claim that the implementation strategy of worship strategies, habituation strategies, exemplary strategies, reward and punishment strategies are beneficial to improve religious character. This research discusses the analysis of religious character education in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning using habituation, motivation, advice and examples methods. This demonstrates how different approaches incorporating elements of worship, habituation, example, and reward and punishment can enhance religious character education. A study by Jannah (2019) regarding methods and strategies for forming religious character at SDTQ-T An Najah Pondok Pesantren Cindai Alus Martapura can also be a relevant reference. This study focuses on the methods used to help students develop their religious character, which include practices like worship, habituation, setting an example, and putting religious principles into practice. This study leads to the conclusion that a variety of holistic techniques, ranging from worship and habituation to the use of rewards and punishments, are part of the implementation plan for enhancing religious character. It is envisaged that by integrating these different approaches, an educational setting that fosters students' development of strong religious character will be established.

c. The Evaluation of Islamic Boarding School Leadership in Strengthening the Religious Character of Students

The study's findings indicate that the Darul Ihsan Aceh Besar Islamic Boarding School evaluates its students' progress in developing a stronger religious character on a monthly, semesterly, and annual basis. The Darul Ihsan Islamic boarding school always does routine evaluations every month and semester as part of its primary responsibilities The deputy leader led this evaluation meeting, which was attended by every member of the Darul Ihsan Islamic boarding school staff. During this meeting, the implementation of student activities for one month was evaluated, challenges were discussed, and plans for the next month's activities were made. A leader can identify the different challenges encountered during the implementation phase by performing an evaluation. Leaders must

periodically evaluate this program to ensure that it is meeting the objectives to build students' religious character. This is done to enable Islamic boarding school leaders to assess the program's efficacy. The sustainability of the planned and executed programs and initiatives depends heavily on this evaluation. Therefore, leaders of the Islamic boarding school are aware of which programs to continue or discontinue. The Darul Ihsan Islamic boarding school's leadership evaluation was completed in an ideal manner, in line with the school's vision, mission, and goals for enhancing the students' religious character.

This finding is in line with Insani's et al. (2023) study examining evaluation of strengthening the religious character of Islamic boarding school students. This study focused on Islamic boarding school students as a basis for strengthening religious values in the Society 5.0 era. According to this study, some recommendations that can help students develop their religious character include adopting an Islamic boarding school culture, which fosters the development of a religious culture, giving good advice, leading by example, becoming accustomed to congregational prayers being held every day, and setting up guidelines and prohibitions for student. In addition to that, Cahyaningrum dan Suyitno (2022) implement religious character education for students at SD Muhammadiyah Karangkajen II during the COVID-19 pandemic in their study. The findings indicate that planning activities in the school prioritizes religious values, such as organizing Al-Quran tadarus (recitation) activities, Al-Quran tahfidz (memorizing), and religious services.

d. Obstacles to Islamic Boarding School Leadership in Strengthening the Religious Character of Students

The research's findings reveal that both internal and external influences can impede students' efforts to develop their religious character. The communal context and lack of understanding of students are examples of external factors that impact the rise and fall of students' religious character beliefs. The character of kids who still adhere to their family's behavioral norms is one example of an internal component. The longer a student's growth, the more the student's thinking will be influenced. There will inevitably be challenges encountered during any program or activity, arising from both internal and external forces. However, the way around this challenge is for administrators to constantly monitor students, offer advice, and set a good example for them so that they will likewise follow good examples.

The solution to this obstacle is strengthening the religious character of the students at the Darul Ihsan Islamic Boarding School. In line with the vision and mission of the Darul Ihsan Aceh Besar Islamic Boarding School, leaders of Islamic boarding schools and staff members involved in their implementation must enhance and maximize planning and implementation in order to strengthen the religious character of the students. This will help the students at the Islamic boarding school develop into knowledgeable, morally upright, and useful members of the community and state.

The finding is in resonance with a study by (Syam, 2020) which discusses strategies for forming the leadership character of students in Islamic boarding schools. This study emphasizes how crucial targeted goals are in forming students' leadership qualities, such as confidence, focused thought, and positive attitude development. Another study by Salman Alfarisi & Nur Efendi (2019) is also in line with the finding of this study, explaining about the transformational leadership of Islamic boarding school leaders in strengthening the religious character of female students. Relevant insights can also be gained from the Islamic boarding school leaders' transformational leadership in fostering the religious character of their female students. This study demonstrates that the application of transformational leadership strategies involves shaping the character of female students through nurturing from the heart, educating by example, and muhadharah (speech) activities. In addition to that, Umam (2020) discusses the leadership style of Kiai (male religious leader) in building the economic independence of Islamic boarding schools. This research highlights the importance of charismatic and democratic leadership styles in building the economic independence of Islamic boarding schools. By referring to these studies, future research can delve deeper into Islamic boarding school leadership techniques to fortify students' religious character at Darul Ihsan Islamic Boarding School, Aceh Besar. It is intended that by focusing on different methods and techniques that have been shown to work in earlier studies, this research would be able to make a significant contribution to the formation of students' religious character in Islamic boarding schools.

4. CONCLUSION

Darul Ihsan Islamic Boarding School implements various strategies, including routine worship, behavioral habits, role modeling, and a reward and punishment system. These strategies, which are applied through systematic planning and recurring assessments, aim to strengthen students' religious character. The study's findings demonstrate the efficacy of this strategy in forming students' religious personalities by highlighting the crucial role that Islamic boarding school administrators play in creating and carrying out programs for religious character education. This research highlights that Islamic boarding school leadership plays a crucial role in forming the religious character of students. The strategies implemented do not only focus on aspects of religious education, but also integrate religious values into students' daily lives through various activities and social interactions. This study provides an important contribution to the understanding of the strategic role of leadership in the development of students' religious character in Islamic boarding schools. The implications of the results of this research can be useful in designing more effective and relevant character education programs in similar educational institutions. This study provides an important contribution to the understanding of the strategic role of leadership in the development of students' religious character in Islamic boarding schools. The research's findings can help similar

educational institutions create character education programs that are more pertinent and successful. Experimental research with a control group can provide deeper insight into the impact of certain leadership strategies on the formation of students' religious character. In addition, further exploration of external factors that influence strategy implementation can also be an area of research that can be developed. Hence, this study gives fresh perspectives on leadership strategies in the setting of Islamic boarding schools and establishes a foundation for future investigations that will deepen our knowledge of religious character education in Indonesia

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