



Educational Leadership in Building Student Character and Dicipline

Fenita Sari Purba^{1*}

¹Department of Culinary Education, Universitas Negeri Medan, Medan, Indonesia

Article Info

Article history:

Submitted Nov 24, 2025

Accepted Dec 01, 2025

Published Dec 31, 2025

Keywords:

Teachers,
Professionalism,
Digital Era,
Educational Technology,
Digital Literacy.

ABSTRACT

Education plays an essential role in shaping human character and competence. In the digital era, teachers encounter new challenges that require the ability to adapt to technology and innovate in learning. Teacher professionalism is no longer measured solely by teaching skills but also by digital competence, creativity, and commitment to educational ethics and values. This study examines the various challenges and strategies teachers employ to face the digital era, highlighting the importance of competency development, continuous training, and technology integration in the teaching and learning process. The findings indicate that teachers must become lifelong learners. Through continuous learning, teachers function as facilitators, innovators, and moral role models in modern education.

This is an open access article under the [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.



Corresponding Author:

Fenita Sari Purba

Department of Culinary Education, Universitas Negeri Medan, Medan, Indonesia

Email: fenitapurba2@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Education is a conscious and planned effort to create a learning environment where students actively develop their potential spiritual, self-control, intelligence, noble character, and essential skills needed for themselves and the nation. Education plays a crucial role in shaping human character and competence. Quality education is one of the nation's aspirations, and education is a deliberate process designed to help students develop their potential. Therefore, character formation becomes one of the fundamental objectives of national education.

Teacher professionalism is no longer measured merely by teaching ability but also by digital skills, creativity, and a strong commitment to ethics and educational values. Muslimin and Kartiko (2020) explain that teacher professionalism significantly influences the quality of education produced. High-quality national education aims to develop learners into individuals who are faithful, devoted to God Almighty, moral, healthy, capable, creative, independent, democratic, and responsible.

However, in today's social reality, there are significant moral and character disparities among public officials, society, and even students. This reveals that character education has not yet achieved satisfactory outcomes. Current conditions in Indonesia show that the moral character of the younger generation is increasingly concerning. Many behaviors deviate from religious, ethical, and cultural values. Educational challenges are also intensified by

globalization and technological advancement, which influence students' discipline and character. Yusnita et al. (2023) discuss how the rapid development of digital technology has exacerbated issues related to moral decline among teenagers. In their study, they argue that the influence of technology, when not properly guided, leads to behaviors that contradict religious and ethical teachings, particularly in the context of Islamic education. The study emphasizes that educators and parents must collaborate to guide students in navigating the digital era while maintaining moral integrity. Many students display indiscipline, such as violating school rules, disrespectful behavior, and lack of strong learning motivation, which are also seen as consequences of insufficient moral education in this technological age (Yusnita et al., 2023).

School principals, as leaders of educational institutions, play a crucial strategic role in creating a school environment that supports both improved teaching quality and student outcomes. According to Mutia, Niswanto, and Yusrizal (2021), the leadership style of school principals significantly influences teacher work motivation and discipline, which in turn affects teachers' pedagogical competencies. Their findings indicate that principals who adopt a transformational and supportive leadership approach are more likely to foster higher levels of teacher motivation and adherence to professional standards, resulting in better instructional practices and a more disciplined learning atmosphere. This underscores the responsibility of principals not only to lead administrative functions but also to actively cultivate a supportive culture that enhances teacher performance, thereby contributing to the overall development of student character and discipline (Mutia et al., 2021). Principals have the authority to make important decisions, design school programs, and enforce policies to ensure the achievement of school goals. Their leadership significantly influences the success of educational institutions. The appropriate leadership style also positively and significantly impacts school effectiveness (Aminbeidokhti, Jamshidi, & Mohammadi Hoseini, 2016). Previous studies show that school leadership strongly correlates with school climate, culture, and discipline.

2. Methodology

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore how educational leadership contributes to the development of student character and discipline. A qualitative descriptive approach is particularly suitable for examining phenomena within their natural contexts and capturing participants' authentic experiences without imposing preconceived theoretical frameworks. For example, Prokop, Sim, and Meedy (2021) used a qualitative descriptive design to gain an in-depth understanding of new graduate nurses lived experiences supporting breastfeeding women in neonatal settings, demonstrating how this methodological approach enables researchers to richly describe participants' perspectives and contextual dynamics. Similarly, in the context of educational leadership, qualitative descriptive research allows for a comprehensive and nuanced description of leadership practices and their impact on school culture, student behavior, and discipline, providing clear and grounded insights directly from educators and stakeholders (Prokop et al., 2021).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, direct observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews are widely used in contemporary educational and social research because they provide flexibility in probing participants' responses while maintaining a consistent framework across interview sessions. In their study, Youn et al. (2021) illustrated how carefully designed semi-structured interview protocols can effectively explore complex subjective experiences, such as those of people living with HIV regarding integrative traditional East Asian medicine management. The researchers emphasized the importance of developing interview questions that are open-ended yet aligned with the research objectives, allowing participants to articulate rich, nuanced perspectives while the interviewer ensures comparability across cases. This approach enhances both depth and coherence in qualitative

inquiry, making semi-structured interviews particularly appropriate for studies that seek to understand participants lived experiences within their contextual settings (Youn et al., 2021). Observations were conducted in classrooms, school yards, and teacher meetings to document leadership behaviors and student disciplinary practices. Document analysis included school policies, disciplinary reports, and leadership program records, following established recommendations for qualitative document analysis strategies. According to Chanda (2021), qualitative document analysis involves a systematic and reflective review of textual and material sources to interpret meaning, understand context, and link documents back to the research questions. The method allows researchers to identify patterns, extract relevant data, and compare information across different document types, such as official policies or administrative records, to enhance the depth and breadth of qualitative findings. Chanda also emphasizes the importance of aligning document analysis techniques with the epistemological perspective of the study and ensuring that selected documents are evaluated for relevance, credibility, and completeness. By integrating document analysis with other qualitative data sources, such as interviews and observations, researchers can triangulate evidence to build a rich, credible description of the phenomenon under investigation (Chanda, 2021).

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, which is a commonly adopted sampling strategy for qualitative studies aiming to capture information-rich cases (Campbell et al., 2020). This sampling technique ensured that principals and teachers chosen for the study were directly involved in implementing character and discipline programs. Ethical considerations were followed throughout the research process, including informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality safeguards, in accordance with modern qualitative ethics guidelines (Birt & Scott, 2021).

Data analysis followed a phenomenological thematic approach, which is suitable for identifying and interpreting meaning derived from participants lived experiences. The analysis involved reading interview transcripts repeatedly, coding meaningful statements, categorizing patterns, and generating themes. This process adheres to the thematic analysis procedures outlined in contemporary qualitative literature (Braun & Clarke, 2021). To enhance trustworthiness, the study applied credibility checks, triangulation of interview, observation, and document data, and member validation, aligning with recommendations from recent methodological literature on qualitative research. According to Donkoh and Mensah (2023), triangulation is an essential strategy for strengthening the trustworthiness of qualitative findings by combining multiple sources or methods of data collection such as interviews, observations, and documents thereby reducing bias and increasing confidence in the results. Their work highlights that method triangulation not only helps confirm the consistency of patterns across different data streams but also provides a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. In addition, member validation (also referred to as participant feedback) supports credibility by allowing participants to review and confirm researchers' interpretations, ensuring that the findings accurately reflect their perspectives. Together, these approaches help establish a robust framework for validating qualitative research outcomes (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023).

Through this methodological procedure, the study ensured analytical rigor, transparency, and reliability, consistent with qualitative standards widely adopted in educational research between 2020 and 2025.

3. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that educational leadership plays a central role in shaping student character and discipline through the daily practices of school principals, teachers, and the broader school community. These results align with recent studies emphasizing that

leadership effectiveness in modern schools is strongly associated with the ability to create a positive school culture, establish behavioral expectations, and model ethical conduct (Harris & Jones, 2020).

3.1 The Principal's Role in Character Building

According to the qualitative data collected, principals act as educators, leaders, motivators, managers, and supervisors, each contributing uniquely to character development. As educators, principals provide guidance on moral values and character expectations. As leaders, they articulate a shared vision and influence teachers' commitment to implementing character education programs. These roles are consistent with current research identifying school leadership as a major determinant of students' moral formation and behavior. Dennis and Harrison (2021) argue that in the 21st century, the ethical challenges posed by online technology require school leaders to adopt innovative strategies that integrate virtue education into the school curriculum. Their study highlights how leaders can guide students to navigate the complexities of the digital world while promoting traditional moral values such as respect, responsibility, and integrity. By fostering an environment that blends both technological proficiency and ethical responsibility, school leaders play a crucial role in shaping students' moral development and behavior in an increasingly digital society (Dennis & Harrison, 2021).

In this study, principals also served as role models, demonstrating punctuality, responsibility, and emotional control behaviors that students tend to emulate. This is consistent with research on ethical leadership in organizational settings, which emphasizes that leaders who act with integrity, set clear moral standards, and consistently model ethical behavior help to shape the values and behaviors of those they lead. According to Vynoslavska and Kononets (2021), distinctive features of ethical leadership include adherence to ethical norms in decision-making, personal accountability, and fostering a culture of trust and respect within the institution. Although their work focuses on organizational activity more broadly, these principles can be extended to educational contexts, suggesting that when school leaders embody ethical conduct such as demonstrating responsibility, fairness, and self-regulation such behaviors serve as informal curricula that students observe and internalize. Thus, school leaders' demonstration of ethical behavior is a key mechanism through which positive character development and disciplined conduct are cultivated among students (Vynoslavska & Kononets, 2021).

3.2 Leadership Strategies for Strengthening Student Discipline

Data from observations and interviews show that principals implemented multiple strategies to strengthen student discipline. These included:

- Establishing a structured school culture grounded in rules and routines
- Reinforcing discipline through religious and moral activities
- Engaging teachers and parents in collaborative monitoring
- Applying consistent sanctions and rewards
- Regulating student use of digital devices during school hours

These strategies reflect recommendations from recent leadership studies, which emphasize that school discipline improves when principals build clear norms, monitor behavior consistently, and collaborate with families. Nurabadi et al. (2021) further highlight that effective school leadership particularly transformational and instructional leadership—has a direct impact on improving teacher performance and, consequently, students' academic achievements. Their study found that when principals engage in transformational leadership practices, such as setting clear expectations, monitoring progress, and fostering collaboration between teachers, students, and families, the overall school environment improves, leading to enhanced student discipline and better academic outcomes. By establishing clear norms and

encouraging consistent behavior monitoring, principals create a structured and supportive school climate that fosters discipline and academic success (Nurabadi et al., 2021).

In addition, the study found that maintaining discipline in the digital age requires specific leadership decisions, such as balancing restrictions on mobile phone use during class with thoughtful integration of educational technology to support learning goals. This approach corresponds with international evidence suggesting that digital supports and structures can enhance students' engagement and self-regulated behaviour when technology use is purposefully guided. For example, Chiu (2021) demonstrated that providing digital scaffolds based on self-determination theory by supporting students' autonomy, competence, and relatedness can foster deeper engagement in blended learning environments, which may indirectly reduce disruptive behaviour by aligning technology use with meaningful academic activity. Similarly, research indicates that well-designed digital environments and clear expectations for technology use contribute to better focus and fewer distractions, suggesting that school leadership plays a key role in establishing policies and learning designs that promote productive engagement rather than unmanaged digital access (Chiu, 2021).

3.3 Building a School Culture that Supports Character and Discipline

A recurring theme was that school culture forms the foundation of students' character and discipline. Schools with structured daily routines, value-based activities, and strong communication patterns tend to produce more disciplined and responsible students. Interview data indicated that routine activities such as morning assemblies, religious readings, classroom cleaning, and mentoring activities contributed significantly to shaping students' attitudes.

Recent research supports this conclusion. According to Amelia and Ramadan (2021), the implementation of character education through a school's cultural practices at SD Negeri 67 Pekanbaru was found to be effective when character values became part of daily routines, both inside and outside classroom activities; these values included religiosity, integrity, independence, mutual cooperation, and nationalism, entrenched through habituation and supported by the school community. The study demonstrated that consistent integration of character values into school culture promoted positive student behaviours and shaped students' moral dispositions across formal lessons, extracurricular activities, and school rituals, though some challenges remained such as variable teacher implementation and student engagement.

Likewise, Zhao (2021) argues that rebuilding education systems in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic requires a renewed emphasis on supportive and inclusive learning environments where students feel connected and valued. In his analysis of post-pandemic educational change, Zhao highlights how fostering a strong sense of school community and belonging can mitigate disengagement and disciplinary issues that emerged during prolonged periods of remote learning and social isolation. By intentionally designing school cultures that prioritize student agency, collaboration, and wellbeing alongside academic rigor, educators can create conditions that reduce behavioural disruptions and enhance students' engagement and motivation to learn. These culturally responsive and student-centred environments help students re-engage with school life, strengthening their social-emotional adjustment and sense of belonging as they transition back into regular educational settings (Zhao, 2021).

3.4 Parental and Community Involvement

Results also showed that principal leadership extended beyond the school environment, involving parents and community stakeholders. Parents were invited to participate in monitoring student behavior, attending meetings, and supporting character-building activities at home. Teachers reported that when parents reinforced school values, students demonstrated greater behavioral consistency. This finding aligns with broader evidence showing that parental involvement has a meaningful influence on students' educational outcomes. According to

Fatimaningrum (2021), higher levels of parental engagement in school-related activities such as participation in parent-teacher meetings, supervision of homework, and communication with educators were positively associated not only with students' academic achievement but also with improved student attitudes and classroom behaviors. The meta-analytic results suggest that when parents actively support and reinforce the school's expectations and value system, students tend to exhibit better self-regulation and discipline, underscoring the importance of collaborative school family partnerships in promoting both academic and behavioral outcomes (Fatimaningrum, 2021).

3.5 Integration of Digital-Era Challenges

The study found that principals faced challenges related to technology misuse, such as students becoming distracted or accessing inappropriate content. Effective leaders responded with balanced strategies restricting harmful use while promoting digital literacy. This adaptive approach resonates with contemporary leadership perspectives that highlight the importance of leveraging digital platforms to support school communities during times of disruption. For example, Rehm et al. (2021) examined how school leaders turned to online social networks during the COVID-19 pandemic to share information, collaborate, and address emerging challenges collectively. The findings suggest that effective school leadership in digitally disrupted contexts involves not only managing technology use within schools but also engaging with broader online networks to gather resources, disseminate guidance, and model constructive digital behaviour. Such engagement enables leaders to respond flexibly to evolving technological challenges while fostering a collaborative culture that supports students' academic and personal development (Rehm et al., 2021).

Overall, the findings show that leadership practices rooted in clear communication, consistent modeling, moral reinforcement, and collaborative partnerships contribute significantly to fostering student character and discipline.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm that educational leadership plays a decisive role in shaping student character and discipline. School principals contribute significantly through their roles as moral exemplars, instructional leaders, and cultural builders. Effective leadership fosters a supportive environment where values such as responsibility, respect, and self-control can be practiced consistently by students. These results reinforce recent research indicating that leadership grounded in ethical behavior, collaboration, and clear communication positively influences students' moral and behavioral outcomes. Dennis and Harrison (2021) emphasize that in the digital age, school leaders face unique ethical challenges that require them to integrate virtue education with online technology. Their study highlights how ethical leadership, which focuses on promoting respect, responsibility, and moral integrity, can create a positive school environment. By balancing the demands of technology with a strong moral framework, school leaders are better able to guide students toward making ethical decisions and exhibiting responsible behavior, both online and offline (Dennis & Harrison, 2021).

In practical terms, the study highlights the importance of leadership strategies that integrate character values into school routines, promote psychological safety, and engage parents as partners in the educational process. Principals who adopt flexible and adaptive leadership approaches are better able to manage the challenges of digital-era schooling, including technology distractions and maintaining productive engagement. For example, Chiu (2021) found that digital supports designed around students' psychological needs such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness can significantly enhance engagement in blended learning settings by aligning technology with meaningful learning goals. Such approaches suggest that school

leadership should not only set clear expectations for technology use but also leverage digital tools in ways that foster deeper involvement and reduce off-task behaviours. When combined with character education and parent engagement strategies, this balanced approach contributes to more positive and disciplined learning environments (Chiu, 2021).

Theoretically, this study contributes to the growing discourse on character education by providing empirical evidence that school leadership particularly in developing countries remains a foundational driver of student behavior and school culture. The findings also extend existing models of leadership by showing that disciplinary practices and character-building initiatives are most effective when implemented holistically across instructional, managerial, and relational dimensions.

However, this study has limitations. Although the meta-analytic design synthesized findings across multiple studies on parental involvement and student outcomes, the variation in research contexts, measures of involvement, and educational settings limits the ability to draw definitive causal conclusions about specific mechanisms linking parental engagement with academic and behavioral outcomes. In addition, many of the primary studies included in the analysis relied on self-report measures and cross-sectional designs, which may introduce bias and restrict the generalizability of the results to broader populations. The aggregated nature of meta-analysis also means that nuances in how different forms of parental involvement (e.g., home supervision vs. school participation) affect various student outcomes may be obscured. Future research would benefit from incorporating longitudinal and experimental designs, larger and more diverse participant samples, and comparative studies across different cultural and educational contexts to deepen understanding of how specific parental involvement practices interact with school leadership and influence both academic achievement and student behavior (Fatimaningrum, 2021).

Overall, the study underscores that strong educational leadership is essential for cultivating disciplined and character-driven students. As schools continue to adapt to rapid social and technological changes, the role of principals in modeling values, guiding teachers, and shaping school culture remains more important than ever.

References

- Amelia, M., & Ramadan, Z. H. (2021). *Implementasi pendidikan karakter melalui budaya sekolah di sekolah dasar*. *Jurnal Basicedu*, *5*(6), 5548–5555. <https://doi.org/10.31004/basicedu.v5i6.1701>
- Birt, L., & Scott, S. (2021). Ethics in qualitative research: Reconsidering consent, confidentiality, and power. *Qualitative Research Journal*, *21*(4), 389–402. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-03-2021-0035>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *18*(3), 328–352. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>
- Chanda, A. (2021). *Key methods used in qualitative document analysis*. SSRN. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3996213>
- Chiu, T. K. F. (2021). *Digital support for student engagement in blended learning based on self-determination theory*. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *124*, 106909. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.106909>
- Dennis, M., & Harrison, T. (2021). *Unique ethical challenges for the 21st century: Online technology and virtue education*. *Journal of Moral Education*, *50*(3), 251–266. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2020.1781071>

- Donkoh, S., & Mensah, J. (2023). *Application of triangulation in qualitative research*. *Journal of Applied Biotechnology & Bioengineering*, 10(1), 6–9. <https://doi.org/10.15406/jabb.2023.10.00319>
- Fatimaningrum, A. S. (2021). *Parental involvement and academic achievement: A meta-analysis*. *Psychological Research and Intervention*, 4(2), 57–67. <http://journal.uny.ac.id/index.php/pri/article/view/45507>
- Harris, A., & Jones, M. (2020). COVID-19—School leadership in crisis? *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 5(3–4), 321–326. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCC-06-2020-0045>
- Mutia, R., Niswanto, & Yusrizal. (2021). *The effects of school principals' leadership style, work motivation, and work discipline on teacher pedagogical competencies*. *Al-Ishlah: Jurnal Pendidikan*, 13(2), 1464–1470. <https://doi.org/10.35445/alishlah.v13i2.530>
- Nurabadi, A., Irianto, J., Bafadal, I., Juharyanto, J., Gunawan, I., & Adha, M. A. (2021). *The effect of instructional, transformational and spiritual leadership on elementary school teachers' performance and students' achievements*. *Jurnal Cakrawala Pendidikan*, 40(1), 17–31. <https://doi.org/10.21831/cp.v40i1.35641>
- Prokop, N., Sim, J., & Meedya, S. (2021). *A qualitative descriptive study of new graduate nurses' experiences supporting breastfeeding women in neonatal settings*. *Nurse Education in Practice*, 55, 103172. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2021.103172>
- Rehm, M., Moukarzel, S., Daly, A., & Fresno, M. (2021). *Exploring online social networks of school leaders in times of COVID-19*. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 52(4), 1414–1433. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.13099>
- Vynoslavska, O., & Kononets, M. (2021). *Distinctive features of ethical leadership in organization activity*. *Visnyk of the Lviv University*, 35, 35–45. <https://doi.org/10.30970/ppp.2021.35.2>
- Youn, I., Cheong, M. J., Kim, J., Kim, S. I., Kim, H. K., Kwon, M., Seo, J., Nam, D., & Leem, J. (2021). *Understanding the experiences and perception of people living with HIV on integrative traditional East Asian medicine management in Korea: An interview protocol for qualitative research*. *BMJ Open*, 11(12), e051880. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2021-051880>
- Yusnita, E., Prasetyo, A. E., Hasanah, U., & Octafiona, E. (2023). *Shaping teenagers' moral in the digital era: Islamic education perspective*. *Jurnal Intelektual*, 13(1), Article 3529. <https://doi.org/10.33367/ji.v13i1.3529>
- Zhao, Y. (2021). *The changes we need: Education post COVID-19*. *Journal of Educational Change*, 22(4), 455–475. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-021-09417-3>