



The Influence of Madrasah Principals' Exemplary Behavior on Teachers' Character in Pandeglang

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Received: December 13, 2025; *Revised:* July 7, 2026, *Accepted:* July 7, 2026, *Published:* July 13, 2026

Abstract: This study critically examines the influence of principals' exemplary leadership on the formation of teacher character in Islamic junior secondary schools (madrasah thanawiyah) under the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Pandeglang Regency. Exemplary leadership is conceptualized as the embodiment of moral integrity, ethical conduct, and professional consistency, whereas teacher character is measured through indicators of integrity, professional ethics, discipline, responsibility, and spiritual commitment. Using a quantitative survey approach involving 34 principals and teachers, the study employed validated instruments that were tested through Exploratory Factor Analysis and Cronbach's alpha reliability procedures. The findings reveal that principals' exemplary leadership is rated highly, predominantly driven by moral and spiritual dimensions, while teacher character is rated very highly. A positive perception gap was identified, with teachers evaluating their principals more positively than principals evaluated themselves, suggesting strong moral legitimacy and symbolic authority attributed to school leaders. Challenges remain in the area of principals' technical professionalism, which requires systematic enhancement. The study recommends integrative leadership development programs that combine ethical modeling with managerial competence. This research advances theoretical understanding of social learning processes in Islamic education, demonstrates the empirical role of moral leadership in shaping teacher character, and offers practical insights for policy formulation in strengthening madrasah leadership quality.

Keywords: accountability; educational leadership; exemplary leadership; madrasah culture; teacher character; teacher professionalism; work motivation.

Introduction

Education in madrasahs has a broader mandate than simply meeting academic standards; it is a space for the development of character, professional ethos, and moral integrity in educators and students. Within this institutional framework, the madrasah principal holds a strategic position as a key figure who not only manages administration but also serves as a role model that influences teachers' attitudes, ethics, and professionalism. This concept of exemplary conduct aligns with Greenleaf's classic notion of servant leadership, which emphasizes that effective leaders demonstrate moral leadership through concrete actions, prioritize the interests of others, and build organizational trust through consistent behavior (Greenleaf, 1977). In madrasahs, this form of exemplary conduct is not only related to a professional work ethic but also penetrates the dimensions of spirituality, sincerity, and noble character, as mandated by the Islamic tradition of educational leadership. Al-Ghazali emphasized that leaders must be good examples reflecting honesty, trustworthiness, justice, and responsibility, so that their behavior and morality can become a source of identification for teachers

(Nata, 2012). This interpretation places the madrasah principal as a central actor in creating an educational environment that fosters teacher character through example, not just verbal instruction.

From a social psychology perspective, the mechanism by which the principal's exemplary behavior influences teacher character can be explained by Bandura's Social Learning Theory. According to this theory, humans learn values and behaviors through the process of observation, imitation, and internalization of authority figures deemed competent or influential (Bağış, 2021). In the madrasah context, the principal serves as a modeling agent whose behavior is observed (attention), remembered (retention), imitated (reproduction), and then implemented (motivation) by teachers. If the principal demonstrates integrity, discipline, fairness, and moral consistency, these values are more easily transferred into teachers' professional practice. This view is reinforced by Robbins and Judge, who assert that leaders who provide strong role models tend to create perceptions of fairness, integrity, and credibility, thus forming a healthy organizational culture and a positive work climate (Robbins & Judge, 2017). In the madrasah context, the implications are more profound because exemplary behavior also touches on religious values that strengthen teachers' spirituality.

In line with this, expert thinking on teacher character holds that character is not a single concept but a set of moral values, personal integrity, professional ethics, discipline, responsibility, and spiritual dimensions. Lickona states that character encompasses aspects of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action, all of which must be manifested in daily teaching practice (Lickona, 1991). Teachers with strong character are not only conveyors of knowledge, but also moral models who can exemplify honesty, responsibility, commitment, and caring. Muslich emphasizes that teacher character includes personal integrity, work discipline, professional ethic, exemplary behavior, wisdom, and a spiritual attitude in carrying out duties (Muslich, 2011). Furthermore, Law No. 14 of 2005 concerning Teachers and Lecturers emphasizes that teachers must have strong, stable, mature, wise, and authoritative personality competencies, and be able to serve as role models for students (Arifudin & Raza Ali, 2022). These dimensions of teacher character are conceptually aligned with the five cultural values of the Ministry of Religion—integrity, professionalism, discipline, responsibility, and exemplary behavior—which form the national ethical framework in madrasah education.

Regarding the relationship between leadership and teacher character development, the literature shows that the role model of a principal influences the character development of subordinates through several theoretical pathways. First, Transformational Leadership Theory places idealized influence as a primary dimension, explaining how leaders exert a powerful influence through consistent moral example (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Principals who demonstrate inspiration, integrity, and personal attention can motivate teachers to continuously improve their professional qualities and morality. Second, Islamic Leadership Theory emphasizes that leaders are the guardians of values, and their exemplary behavior in trustworthiness, justice, and noble character will naturally be internalized by teachers (Nata, 2012). Third, Schein's Organizational Culture Theory explains that leaders are the creators, reinforcers, and guardians of organizational culture, so their role models influence teachers' behavioral norms, such as discipline, loyalty, accountability, and work ethic (E. H. Schein, 2010). These three perspectives consistently state that teacher character development does not occur spontaneously, but rather through a social process that occurs in the workplace and is determined by leadership figures.

Furthermore, empirical research across various educational contexts has shown that exemplary leadership significantly impacts the character development, discipline, integrity, and work commitment of subordinates. Surya found that leaders who demonstrate integrity and consistent behavior can improve staff morale and create an ethical organizational culture (Surya, 2020). Rijal reported that exemplary leadership influences teacher discipline and professional ethics (Rijal, 2023). Dian's research also shows that leaders who exemplify behavior and responsibility can increase organizational commitment and work motivation among educational staff (Dian, 2021). These empirical findings align with recent studies showing that transformational leadership of madrasah principals significantly impacts teacher performance, motivation, and professional ethics in Indonesia (Roesminingsih & Windasari, 2025). Overall, the literature strongly indicates that exemplary leadership by madrasah principals is a crucial determinant in teacher character development and fostering a professional work culture.

However, although numerous studies have been conducted on principal leadership styles and their influence on teacher motivation and performance, a significant research gap remains regarding the systematic relationship between principals' exemplary behavior and teacher character formation in the context of Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia. Most previous studies have focused on aspects of teacher performance, productivity, job satisfaction, organizational culture, or motivation, but have not specifically examined how principals' exemplary behavior shapes teachers' character as moral and professional entities. Furthermore, research examining junior high schools (madrasah tsanawiyah) under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, particularly in Pandeglang Regency, is still limited, despite the region's unique religious cultural characteristics and institutional dynamics that differ from urban contexts. These research limitations demonstrate the need for more in-depth research to understand the mechanisms of principals' exemplary behavior as a variable capable of directly shaping teacher character.

Based on the theoretical and empirical gaps, this study was designed to fill the gap in the literature by comprehensively analyzing the influence of the exemplary role of madrasah principals on the character formation of teachers at the junior high school level within the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Pandeglang Regency. The research problem was formulated specifically as follows: "How much influence does the exemplary role of madrasah principals have on the character formation of teachers at the junior high school level within the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Pandeglang Regency?" Thus, the main objective of this study is to examine and analyze the influence of the exemplary role of madrasah principals on teacher character, including aspects of integrity, discipline, professionalism, responsibility, and professional ethics which are conceptually and empirically the main components of educator character. The results of this study are expected to not only provide theoretical contributions to the development of Islamic educational leadership studies and teacher character theory, but also have practical implications for strengthening madrasah principal development policies and improving the quality of education within the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Method

This study employed a quantitative approach with a survey method, as all data were analyzed through numerical measurements and questionnaire responses completed by respondents. The survey design was chosen to obtain an objective empirical picture of the level of exemplary madrasah principals and teacher character, while simultaneously testing the causal relationships between variables in a measurable manner, as suggested in quantitative-based educational research (Creswell, 2023). The study population included all teachers and madrasah principals at the junior high school level within the Ministry of Religious Affairs Regency, with a total of 34 respondents representing 34 madrasahs. This number meets the principle of total sampling for a limited population context to ensure maximum representativeness (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2022).

The research instrument was developed as a 1–5 Likert-scale questionnaire, suitable for measuring perceptions and psychosocial characteristics in educational research (Sugiyono, 2023). The Madrasah Principal Exemplary Behavior Instrument was completed by teachers and madrasah principals, assessing six main components: integrity, moral consistency, justice, professionalism, accountability, and commitment to religious values. Meanwhile, the Teacher Character Instrument was completed by teachers to assess their own character, encompassing indicators of integrity, discipline, professional responsibility, professional ethics, self-development, and moral consistency in the teaching process. Both instruments were developed based on the principle of construct-based assessment to ensure each indicator aligns with the theoretical definition of the variables (Arifin, 2022).

Prior to analysis, the instruments were tested using validity and reliability checking as recommended in modern quantitative research (Hair et al., 2024). Construct validity was tested using exploratory factor analysis (EFA), which showed that all indicators had factor loadings above 0.20, meeting the minimum interpretative threshold in social studies (Yong & Pearce, 2019). The highest indicator for the role model variable was moral consistency (0.69), while for teacher character, the highest indicators were integrity and moral consistency with values >0.90 , indicating a strong factor structure. Furthermore, the reliability test produced a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.84 for the madrasah principal role model instrument and 0.92 for the teacher character instrument.

These values are in the high reliability category and indicate excellent internal consistency (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

Data analysis was conducted using simple linear regression and multiple linear regression to determine the extent to which the principal's exemplary behavior influences teacher character. Simple regression was used to examine the direct effect of the exemplary behavior variable as a whole, while multiple regression was used when the exemplary behavior variable was broken down into several indicators to examine the contribution of each dimension, as recommended in the latent variable relationship analysis model (Kline, 2023). Prior to the regression, the data were tested for normality, multicollinearity, and linearity to ensure that the basic assumptions of parametric statistics were met. This step follows the standard regression model analysis in social science research, which requires rigorous examination of assumptions to maintain inferential validity (Lundie et al., 2022).

The entire data processing process was conducted using a quantitative approach based on inferential statistics, and the final results are presented in the form of regression coefficients, significance values, and coefficients of determination. The use of these indicators allows researchers to accurately measure the level of influence of the madrasah principal's exemplary behavior on teacher character formation, particularly in the context of junior high madrasahs within the Ministry of Religious Affairs Regency.

Results and Discussion

Exemplary Behavior of Madrasah Principals Based on Self-Assessment

The results of a study on the exemplary behavior of madrasah principals based on self-assessment show a picture consistent with contemporary leadership theory and the Islamic education paradigm, which places morality as the primary foundation of educational leadership. Survey data involving 34 madrasah tsanawiyah principals indicate that the level of exemplary behavior of madrasah principals is in the high category, with an overall average score of 4.23. This value illustrates that madrasah principals generally assess themselves as having displayed exemplary leadership behavior that aligns with the professional demands and ethical norms of Islamic educational institutions. This value trend aligns with the findings of studies on educational leadership in the context of Islamic institutions, which emphasize that madrasah principals have a central role in creating a strong moral culture through consistent role modeling, not merely through formal regulations or administrative instructions (Siahaan et al., 2023).

Further review reveals that moral-spiritual exemplarity is the most dominant aspect in the self-assessment of madrasah principals, compared to technical professional exemplarity. This is evident from the highest score on the commitment to religious and moral values indicator, with an average of 4.56. This high score indicates that madrasah principals view themselves as figures who make spiritual integrity the primary foundation of leadership. They see that effective leadership in madrasahs is inseparable from the internalization of religious values, such as honesty, trustworthiness, sincerity, and noble character, which serve as sources of moral legitimacy for a leader in the eyes of both teachers and students. This finding aligns with empirical studies showing that leaders of Islamic educational institutions who emphasize spiritual values are often able to create a more harmonious work climate, respect the dignity of teachers, and increase job satisfaction (Hossain et al., 2024).

The next indicator with a high score was listening, supporting, and guiding teachers, with an average score of 4.35. These data demonstrate that madrasah principals position themselves not merely as administrators but as professional mentors actively involved in the teacher development process. They see themselves as mentors who provide space for dialogue, accommodate aspirations, and help teachers overcome obstacles in the learning process. This pattern illustrates the application of transformative leadership values, which emphasize strong interpersonal relationships and empower teachers as professional partners (Ghamrawi et al., 2024). In transformational leadership, leaders encourage the development of subordinates through inspiration, individualized attention, and emotional and professional support. Madrasah principals' attitudes of listening and supporting teachers reflect the individualized consideration dimension, a key characteristic of Bass and Avolio's model (Koveshnikov & Ehrnrooth, 2018).

Another indicator that received high praise was moral and ethical consistency, with a score of 4.15. This indicates that the principal views himself as a figure who behaves consistently between words and actions, upholds moral values in various situations, and is able to set an example in maintaining ethics both in the context of administration and social activities within the madrasah environment. This moral consistency is an important foundation in building a leader's credibility. Contemporary studies indicate that moral consistency is one of the pillars of educational leadership that determines the level of teacher trust in their leader (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2015). Teachers will tend to follow leaders who demonstrate harmony between stated principles and actual daily actions. In the madrasah context, the moral consistency of the madrasah principal is not only assessed from a professional aspect, but also from adherence to religious norms, commendable morals, and social civility.

On the other hand, several indicators scored relatively lower than the moral-spiritual indicators. For the professional exemplary behavior indicator, which encompasses time discipline, fulfilling professional promises, and accuracy in completing administrative tasks, the average score was 3.82. This indicates that madrasah principals feel there is room for improvement in the technical aspects of their professionalism. Although still in the high category, this score indicates a gap between moral-spiritual leadership ideals and technical managerial competencies. Recent research confirms that madrasah principals with strong moral strengths do not necessarily demonstrate optimal managerial performance, especially in the increasingly complex context of educational administration (Karim et al., 2025).

The indicator for fairness in treating teachers also showed a score that was not as high as other moral-spiritual indicators, namely 3.91. This score indicates that madrasah principals still need to improve their capacity to consistently apply equity principles, particularly in providing appreciation, assigning tasks, and handling internal conflicts. Fairness is a crucial aspect of educational leadership models because it forms the basis for building trust in leader-subordinate relationships. When teachers feel unfairly treated, even in minor aspects, it can impact their motivation and professional commitment (Eren & Rakıcıoğlu-Söylemez, 2021).

The accountability and transparency indicator received an average score of 3.85. This score indicates that madrasah principals assess that they have made efforts to implement transparency in the management of madrasah programs, policies, and administration, but still face challenges in maintaining consistency, particularly in reporting and teacher involvement in decision-making processes. In the context of modern educational governance, openness and accountability are increasingly important, especially in public-based institutions such as madrasahs. Several studies confirm that educational leader accountability is strongly correlated with teacher trust and participation in organizational development (Louis & Murphy, 2017). Therefore, a score of 3.85 on this indicator indicates significant room for improvement.

These empirical findings strongly align with Bandura's Social Learning theory, which states that subordinates' behavior and character are formed through observing, imitating, and internalizing modeled behavior in the workplace (Rumjaun & Narod, 2025). In this context, the principal serves as a primary role model for teachers, particularly in terms of morality and ethics. When the principal demonstrates a strong commitment to religious values, moral consistency, and integrity, teachers tend to emulate and internalize these behaviors. This aligns with the assertion that modeling has a stronger effect than verbal instruction in character formation (Bandura, 2021).

Furthermore, these findings are consistent with the Transformational Leadership theory developed by Bass and Avolio. In this theory, transformational leaders not only guide their subordinates but also inspire them, build moral values, and motivate them through strong role models (Bass & Avolio, 1990). The idealized influence dimension is highly relevant to the indicators of moral commitment and integrity, which are the most prominent aspects in madrasah principals' self-assessments. When leaders demonstrate idealized influence, teachers view them as role models worthy of emulation, both morally and professionally (Wang et al., 2021).

An equally important theoretical interpretation is the analysis of leadership from an Islamic perspective. Al-Ghazali's thinking emphasizes that leaders are guardians of societal morality and are responsible for maintaining a balance between the spiritual and administrative dimensions. In Al-Ghazali's perspective, a leader's strength lies not in power, but in morals, piety, and justice, demonstrated through concrete actions (Budur, 2024). This is highly relevant to the high scores on

the commitment to religious values and moral consistency indicators in this study. Meanwhile, Nata's thinking also emphasizes that Islamic educational leadership must combine integrity, justice, and technical professionalism to achieve complete effectiveness (Nata, 2021).

Thus, the data obtained indicate that madrasah principals tend to place morality and spirituality as the foundation of leadership, and this tendency is consistent with Islamic leadership theory and the learning theory model (Egel & Fry, 2017). However, there is still room for improvement, particularly in the areas of technical professionalism, accountability, and fairness. These findings provide a strong foundation for understanding how the principal's exemplary behavior is a crucial factor in shaping teacher character and fostering a successful educational culture within the madrasah environment.

Teacher Assessment of the Principal's Personal Character and Exemplary Behavior

Teachers' assessments of their own character and the exemplary behavior of madrasah principals provide a crucial empirical picture for mapping educational quality, particularly in the context of establishing an institutional culture based on integrity, morality, and professionalism. A survey involving junior high school teachers showed that teacher character was in the very high category, with an overall average score of 4.61. This figure not only reflects teachers' positive perceptions of their personal and professional qualities but also reflects the strong organizational culture of education under the auspices of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. These findings align with research on character education, which states that teachers' self-perceptions of their ethical and professional qualities are significant predictors of learning quality and the overall effectiveness of the learning environment (Grango et al., 2021). Thus, these data demonstrate that madrasah teachers not only understand the moral and ethical standards set by their institutions but also internalize them in their daily practices.

The overall average teacher character score of 4.61 places the teacher character category at a very high level. This indicates that teachers perceive themselves as possessing strong personal and professional qualities in carrying out their role as educators. In character education theory, Lickona emphasizes that the quality of teacher character is the primary foundation for the success of students' moral education, as teachers serve as living role models who influence the ethical structure of the school (Lickona, 2018). Although Lickona's theory was developed earlier, its application is increasingly relevant in contemporary research, as demonstrated by recent studies confirming that teachers with high self-perceptions of character tend to deliver more empathetic, humanistic, and morally oriented learning (Danino & Maoz, 2025). Therefore, the very high scores recorded in this study can be read as a strong indicator of the quality of educational human resources in prime condition.

Furthermore, the high teacher character scores are closely related to the Ministry of Religious Affairs' institutional efforts to strengthen integrity, professionalism, and work discipline through various educational development and quality improvement programs. A work culture that emphasizes moderation, accountability, and ethics-based public service contributes to shaping teachers' professional personality structure. This aligns with educational management research findings that state that teacher character is a direct reflection of the school's organizational culture and the leadership style of the principal (Lehmann et al., 2025). Therefore, these high scores reflect not only individual perceptions but also a manifestation of an educational ecosystem conducive to professional character development.

The indicator of support for madrasa culture ranked highest, with an average score of 5.46. This high score indicates that teachers have a very strong level of commitment to maintaining, strengthening, and implementing madrasa institutional values. This value has strategic significance, because madrasa culture is an element that shapes the institution's identity and is a key pillar in creating a character-based learning environment. In the context of Islamic education, support for madrasa culture is not merely adherence to norms and regulations, but also a form of internalization of religious values, such as integrity, trustworthiness, and *ihsan*, which are the soul of Islamic educational leadership (Djuaini, 2025).

Theoretically, strong teacher support for madrasah culture aligns with the view that the effectiveness of educational organizations is strongly influenced by the alignment between individual and organizational values. Modern educational leadership research finds that teachers who have an

emotional bond and aligned values with their school tend to demonstrate higher performance, better discipline, and stronger professional commitment (Blaik Hourani et al., 2023). Thus, this indicator is a positive signal that strengthens the sustainability of madrasah culture as a morally based educational institution.

The indicators of integrity, professional ethics, and professional development received an average score of 4.54, indicating that madrasa teachers possess high moral and professional standards. Teacher integrity is a key element in character education, as teachers serve as role models for students in terms of honesty, responsibility, and consistent behavior. In contemporary studies of Islamic education, teacher integrity is considered a key pillar in shaping student character because teachers not only teach material but also influence students' moral structure through their daily behavior (Alhakam Wicaksono et al., 2024).

Strong professional ethics are also evident from high scores on this indicator. Teachers not only understand the code of ethics but also consistently apply it in their professional duties. This aligns with the concept of professional ethical identity, which suggests that teachers who have internalized their professional ethics tend to be more responsive, empathetic, and responsible in dealing with classroom dynamics (Sarraf-Yazdi et al., 2021).

Meanwhile, high scores on the professional development aspect indicate that madrasah teachers have a strong awareness of continuously improving their competencies. This is crucial because 21st-century education demands that teachers be adaptive, progressive, and innovative in their teaching methods (Almazroa & Alotaibi, 2023). Recent educational research emphasizes that teachers who are committed to professional growth tend to produce more meaningful learning and improve student learning outcomes (Smith & Gillespie, 2023).

The professional responsibility indicator, which recorded a score of 4.40, indicates that madrasah teachers have a high awareness of their duties, functions, and roles as educators. Professional responsibility encompasses various aspects, such as lesson preparation, classroom management, ongoing evaluation, and a commitment to students' moral and academic development (Karakose et al., 2023).

In modern educational management literature, professional responsibility is an indicator of teacher core competencies that directly impacts the quality of learning (Antera, 2021). Recent studies confirm that teachers with high levels of professional responsibility tend to be more organized, disciplined in developing learning materials, and better able to create a productive classroom environment (Rino & Setiawan, 2025). Therefore, a high score on this indicator reflects stable and consistent professional quality.

The discipline indicator, with a score of 4.37, indicates that teachers have good work habits, particularly regarding punctuality, adherence to rules, and consistency in carrying out daily responsibilities. Discipline is a fundamental dimension of the teaching profession, as teacher discipline directly serves as an example for students and determines the smooth running of the learning process (Kropáč et al., 2023).

From an educational leadership perspective, teacher discipline is a consequence of a strong organizational culture and the leadership of a madrasah principal who sets a moral and professional example (Hasibuan, 2022). Educational management research also shows that the level of teacher discipline correlates with the stability of institutional performance and the quality of educational services (Krskova & Baumann, 2017). Therefore, high scores on this indicator reinforce the finding that madrasah teachers' character quality is at an excellent level.

Empirical findings related to teacher character have significant implications for the quality of madrasa education. From a character theory perspective, the results of this study are consistent with the basic concept of character education as formulated by Lickona, which emphasizes three pillars: moral knowledge, moral feeling, and moral action (Lickona, 2018). Teachers with strong character in terms of integrity, discipline, professional ethics, and professional responsibility will be key agents in transmitting these values to students.

Furthermore, these findings are relevant to the teacher competency standards stipulated in Law No. 14 of 2005, which emphasizes four core competencies: pedagogical, personality, professional, and social (Karim et al., 2021). The data show that madrasah teachers meet most of these indicators at very high levels, particularly in the personality and professional categories. This

strengthens the argument that teacher character is not merely an individual psychological phenomenon but also a normative requirement institutionalized by the state (Shah, 2023).

In the context of the Ministry of Religious Affairs' work culture, high teacher character scores demonstrate the successful internalization of the values of civil servants (ASN) with morals and a culture of religious moderation. Madrasah teachers serve not only as educators but also as moral ambassadors, strengthening the image of Islamic educational institutions as inclusive, moderate, and professional. Recent research shows that faith-based educational institutions that successfully integrate the values of moderation and professionalism have higher levels of organizational stability and improved learning effectiveness (Hutagaol et al., 2025).

Thus, high teacher character values provide a theoretical and empirical basis for demonstrating that improving the quality of education in madrasahs is highly dependent on the personal and professional qualities of teachers (Tambak & Sukenti, 2025). Teachers with strong character will create a healthy, humanistic, and morally oriented learning climate, enabling madrasahs to fulfill their role as educational institutions that combine intellectual and moral intelligence.

Analysis of the Alignment of Perceptions of Madrasah Principals and Teachers

The research findings indicate a positive perception gap between the principal's assessment of himself and the teachers' assessment of the principal's exemplary behavior. In general, teachers gave higher scores to their leader figures than the principals themselves. This phenomenon has important theoretical and practical implications, particularly in the context of teacher character formation and the dynamics of educational leadership. These findings also align with recent research suggesting that teachers tend to assess their leaders through actual behavioral indicators directly experienced in the workplace, while principals typically assess themselves through more critical internal reflection (Karim et al., 2025). Thus, the difference in positive perceptions from teachers indicates that the principal's leadership is seen as successful in building strong moral, ethical, and professional relationships at the operational level of the madrasah.

In the indicator breakdown, the largest gap was found in the moral and spiritual commitment aspect, with a difference of +0.90 between teacher assessments and the principal's self-assessment. Teachers viewed the principal as a figure who was very firm in religious values, ethics, and morality, higher than how the principal assessed the consistency of these values within himself. This finding indicates that the principal's spiritual and moral behavior is truly visible and felt by teachers in their daily leadership practices. This is consistent with the madrasah leadership literature, which confirms that a leader's spirituality significantly influences staff and teacher perceptions of an educational institution's core values (Siswanto, 2022). This moral-spiritual aspect is the most visible foundation, as teachers interact directly with moral decisions, ethical policies, and examples of religious behavior or other moral attitudes demonstrated by the madrasah leader.

The next indicator showing a significant gap is professional exemplary behavior, with a difference of +0.72. Teachers perceived the principal's discipline, consistent work commitment, punctuality, and professional integrity as stronger than the principal's self-assessment. This suggests that teachers perceive the principal's exemplary behavior more holistically and concretely through administrative routines, formal interactions, and the leader's consistency in upholding professional work standards (Sutrisno, 2021). Within the framework of transformational leadership theory, such behavior is a component of idealized influence, which makes the leader a role model for subordinates to emulate (Afshari, 2022). When teachers rate this indicator higher, it indicates that the principal has met the professional expectations they deem essential as part of the madrasah's work culture.

The third indicator showing a perception gap is accountability and transparency, with a difference of +0.63. Teachers rated the madrasah principal as quite open in the decision-making process, information distribution, and accountability reporting. This difference in perception indicates that teachers perceive communication patterns as clear, open, and easy to understand. Meanwhile, madrasah principals tend to rate themselves lower because they often find transparency challenging, especially when dealing with complex administrative policies. Studies on school leadership indicate that teachers will give positive assessments as long as leaders demonstrate consistency in communication and openness to dialogue (Banwo et al., 2022). Therefore, positive teacher perceptions on this indicator indicate a healthy and participatory working relationship.

Furthermore, a perception difference of +0.54 emerged for the personal integrity indicator. Teachers rated the principal's integrity in carrying out duties, maintaining trust, and consistent behavior higher than the principal's self-assessment. This suggests that the madrasah leader has demonstrated moral character that is clearly perceived by the teachers. Personal integrity is often more easily observed by subordinates than objectively assessed by the leader themselves. Principals may be more critical of themselves, thus assessing their personal integrity as having room for improvement. This finding aligns with research that emphasizes that teachers view leader integrity as the most important aspect in building a culture of trust in the school environment (Mansor et al., 2021).

This positive perception gap can be interpreted as a form of respect, trust, and appreciation among teachers for the madrasah principal. Teachers view their leaders as ideal moral figures worthy of emulation, while the madrasah principals themselves do not rate themselves as highly as the teachers perceive them. From a leadership theory perspective, this phenomenon aligns with the concept of Social Learning Theory, which asserts that individuals learn through observing the behavior of others perceived as possessing moral authority, competence, or a certain position (Rotter, 2021). When teachers rate the madrasah principal higher in various moral, ethical, and professional aspects, it indicates that the leader has become an influential role model in the process of character formation for teachers. Teachers embed these moral and ethical values in their behavior because they frequently observe the madrasah principal's exemplary behavior in daily work interactions.

Furthermore, teachers' positive perceptions also indicate a strong organizational culture in madrasahs. A healthy organizational culture influences how teachers view their leaders (Thomaidou Pavlidou & Efstathiades, 2021). When the culture prioritizes morality, cooperation, spirituality, and professionalism, leaders who consistently uphold these values will be viewed positively by organizational members. This aligns with the view that organizational culture can strengthen the role of leaders' role models in shaping teacher character (Nata, 2021). Thus, the positive perception gap not only reflects the interpersonal relationship between leaders and teachers but also indicates the existence of a cultural structure that supports ethical and inspirational leadership practices.

Implicitly, this gap in positive perceptions significantly influences teacher character formation. When teachers view the madrasah principal as a morally and professionally ideal figure, the internalization of character values will be stronger and faster. Teachers tend to emulate moral behavior because their perceptions of the leader are highly positive and trusting. Other research shows that positive perceptions of leaders contribute significantly to teachers' moral motivation and professional commitment (Chen, 2025). In this context, teacher character is formed not only through regulations or policy instruments, but also through real interactions, psychological experiences, and social relationships built with madrasah leaders.

These findings confirm the relevance of Social Learning theory and organizational culture theory in understanding how leader role models influence teacher character development (Kareem et al., 2025). When teachers perceive a leader's role model as highly positive, the character-building process is more effective because teachers have a clear, familiar, and directly observable moral model. Therefore, the positive perception gap is not merely a statistical difference, but rather a reflection of the pedagogical and psychological dynamics that strengthen teachers' professional character in Islamic junior high schools (Karwadi et al., 2025).

Synthesis Discussion: Theoretical and Practical Implications

The synthesis of this research's findings demonstrates a consistent relational structure between the exemplary behavior of madrasah principals, teacher character, and both parties' perceptions of the quality of their leadership. The first objective of the study, which was to assess the level of exemplary behavior of madrasah principals, showed an overall score in the high category, with a strong dominance in the moral-spiritual dimension. This finding confirms that madrasah principals generally position themselves as moral figures who serve as guardians of values, particularly those related to integrity, ethical consistency, and commitment to religious teachings. This aligns with the literature on Islamic educational leadership, which emphasizes that a leader's primary function is to serve as a moral role model who guides the learning community toward superior morality (Reksiana et al., 2024). The dominance of the moral-spiritual aspect also reinforces the view that madrasah leadership is inseparable from Islamic religious tradition and spirituality, which places leaders as *qudwah*

hasanah (qualified and excellent) (Alwi, 2021). Thus, this finding affirms the perspective that the core of leadership in religious educational institutions rests more on moral ethos than technical-administrative skills.

The second objective, assessing teacher character, also showed very high scores and reflected the internalization of moral values, professionalism, and discipline. The high achievement of teacher character suggests that the madrasah work culture has created a conducive ecosystem for strengthening the professional character of educators. This is relevant to the comprehensive character theory that positions educational institutions as spaces for moral habituation, where teachers serve as role models and are simultaneously subjects of continuous development within a framework of professional morality (Lickona, 2018). In line with national education regulations, these findings also reflect alignment with the educator character standards in Law 14/2005, which emphasizes integrity, responsibility, professional ethics, and discipline as the foundation of teacher personality competency in Indonesia (Loeneto et al., 2022). Thus, these very high scores demonstrate not only individual behavioral achievements but also the success of the institutional ecosystem in instilling character values.

The third objective of the study, which examined the congruence of perceptions between the principal and teachers, revealed an important finding in the form of a positive perception gap, where teachers rated the principal's exemplary behavior higher than the principal's own. This phenomenon indicates that teachers view the principal not only as an administrative leader but also as a moral figure who is respected, trusted, and collectively appreciated. From a social psychology perspective, this phenomenon aligns with the concept of idealized influence in transformational leadership theory (Bass, 2019), which explains that subordinates tend to place their leader in an ideal position when the leader demonstrates alignment between their values, behavior, and communication style. On the other hand, the principal's tendency to undervalue himself can be understood as a form of modesty bias, or humility, common in Islamic leadership culture (Hsu et al., 2022). This finding reinforces the view that spiritual-based leadership tends to foster a positive image in the eyes of organizational members, so that teachers view the principal not only as an administrator but also as a moral and spiritual role model.

The fourth objective, which examined the influence of role models on teacher character, received strong support through the differences in perceptions found. The positive perception gap between principals and teachers indicates that teachers perceive these role models as more tangible and significant in their professional lives. Within the framework of Social Learning Theory (Bağış, 2021), this condition can be understood as evidence that the moral role models displayed by leaders serve as behavioral models that are observed, internalized, and replicated by teachers in their work contexts. Leaders who demonstrate high integrity, moral commitment, and accountability will encourage organizational members to emulate these behavioral patterns. Furthermore, Schein's organizational culture theory states that the quality of members' character is strongly influenced by the leader's ongoing value system (S. Schein, 2017). Thus, the findings of this study indicate that the moral role models of madrasah principals are a dominant factor in shaping teacher character, not merely formal institutional regulations or procedures.

Theoretically, this study makes a significant contribution by strengthening the relevance of the Social Learning model in the context of Islamic education. Findings regarding the influence of the moral example of madrasah principals on teacher character confirm that the social learning process actively occurs in a values-based educational environment. Leaders who demonstrate strong morality act as role models, indirectly shaping behavioral standards for teachers. This finding is consistent with the understanding that character formation in the educational ecosystem does not occur mechanically, but relationally through patterns of interaction, communication, and role modeling (Hashim & Langgulang, 2021). Furthermore, the findings of this study also affirm transformational leadership theory, particularly the dimensions of idealized influence and inspirational motivation, which suggest that leaders with high moral capacity can foster positive character in the workplace (Rani et al., 2020). At the same time, this study enriches the study of Islamic leadership by providing empirical evidence that spiritual values remain a strong foundation for contemporary madrasah leadership.

From a practical perspective, the primary implication lies in the need to strengthen the technical professionalism of madrasah principals' leadership. Although the moral-spiritual dimension

is already very strong, lower scores on professional aspects such as accountability, transparency, and performance management indicate the need for further training. Madrasah principals need capacity building in performance planning, quality control, time management, and modern administrative skills. This is crucial to maintaining a balance between morality and professionalism, as recommended in the competency standards for madrasah principals, which emphasize the importance of managerial competencies and instructional supervision (Ahmad Amir Aziz & Miftahul Huda, 2024). Furthermore, another practical implication relates to the need to strengthen an organizational culture that supports openness, reflection, and continuous evaluation, so that teachers have greater space to participate in strengthening educational quality. Therefore, improving madrasah quality relies not only on the moral example of leaders but also on a more robust and systematic professional structure

Conclusion

This study confirms that the exemplary behavior of madrasah principals is a strategic variable that plays a central role in shaping teacher character at the junior high school level. The research questions posed have been consistently answered through empirical data and theoretical synthesis. First, the exemplary behavior of madrasah principals is in the high category, with a predominance of moral-spiritual exemplars that reflect the strong ethical orientation of leaders in building a foundation for values-based leadership, not merely administrative ones. Second, teacher character is in the very high category, indicating that the internalization of professional and moral values desired by the Islamic education system has taken place significantly in teachers' daily practices.

Third, the analysis of perception congruence revealed a positive perception gap, where teachers gave higher ratings to the madrasah principal than the principal himself. This phenomenon indicates strong moral legitimacy, as well as symbolic acceptance of a leadership figure who is seen as authoritative and worthy of emulation. Fourth, this difference in perception strengthens the conclusion that the madrasah principal's exemplary behavior has a substantive influence on teacher character formation, in line with the principles of Social Learning Theory, which views leaders as significant models, transformational leadership theory, which positions leaders as sources of value inspiration, and organizational culture theory, which views leaders as producers and guardians of institutional norms.

Theoretically, this study emphasizes that in the context of Islamic education, role models are not merely normative ideals but epistemic tools that possess transformational power in shaping educators' character. The research's theoretical contribution lies in the assertion that the moral-spiritual dimension of leaders holds a hegemonic position in influencing teachers' ethical awareness, transcending formal instruction and structural mechanisms. Practically, this study encourages the need to strengthen the professional capacity of madrasah principals, particularly in the areas of accountability, procedural consistency, and managerial discipline, so that strong moral-spiritual role models can be integrated with technical professionalism in a balanced manner.

However, this study has limitations, particularly the limited sample size and the quantitative design, which does not fully capture the complexity of the emotional, cultural, and symbolic relationships between principals and teachers. Further research is recommended using a mixed methods approach, expanding the geographic scope, and examining the role of mediating variables such as organizational commitment, work culture, and job satisfaction to deepen our understanding of the mechanisms of teacher characterization within the madrasah ecosystem. Overall, this study concludes that the role model of madrasah principals—especially in the moral-spiritual aspects—is the most decisive foundation in shaping teacher character and the quality of madrasah education.

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