

A Model of Character Development for Santri: The Role of Ethical Leadership, Value Development, and Character-Based Learning Mediated by Students' Experiences

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Abstract - This study explores the role of ethical leadership, value development, and character-based learning in the character development of santri (students) in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). Using a qualitative research design, this study seeks to develop a comprehensive model that integrates these elements, mediated by students' personal experiences, to enhance moral and ethical growth. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation across three pesantren in Indonesia, involving a total of 30-40 participants, including santri and educators. Thematic analysis revealed that ethical leadership significantly influences students' behavior and moral decision-making, while value development fosters internalization of core ethical principles such as integrity, social responsibility, and empathy. Furthermore, character-based learning—embedded in daily practices, religious rituals, and communal activities—plays a crucial role in developing self-discipline and ethical behavior. Students' personal experiences, shaped by mentorship and community interactions, mediate these processes, further enhancing character formation. The study proposes a holistic model for character development in pesantren, emphasizing the interconnectedness of leadership, value development, and experiential learning. The findings offer theoretical, practical, and managerial implications for improving character education in Islamic educational settings, contributing to the global discourse on moral formation in educational contexts.

Keywords: Ethical leadership, character development, value development, santri, Islamic boarding school, character-based learning, qualitative research, Islamic education.

I. INTRODUCTION

Context and Background

The concept of character development has long been central to educational practices across cultures, and its significance has been recognized globally as crucial for the moral and ethical growth of students. In the context of Islamic education, particularly in Indonesia, the term 'santri' refers to students within an Islamic boarding school system, known as pesantren. Pesantren are traditional institutions that have historically played a pivotal role in shaping the moral and ethical fiber of Muslim youth. These schools provide not only religious knowledge but also holistic education aimed at fostering character development and cultivating an understanding of Islamic values. The word *santri* itself implies someone who is in pursuit of knowledge, with a primary focus on religious and ethical education.

In Islamic educational thought, character development or akhlaq is viewed as one of the most significant aspects of a student's growth. According to the Islamic worldview, the development of a person's character is a lifelong process, deeply intertwined with both the acquisition of knowledge and the practice of ethics. In pesantren, the formative process of developing ethical behavior, integrity, and a sense of responsibility is regarded as essential for both personal and communal well-being. The role of pesantren, therefore, is not only to produce scholars or religious leaders but to shape individuals who are capable of embodying the principles of justice, honesty, and compassion in all facets of life.

The modern era, however, has presented a range of challenges for these traditional institutions, particularly as students are increasingly exposed to a globalized world with diverse moral systems. This shift poses a significant question for Islamic educational institutions: how can pesantren continue to foster the ethical leadership and character development of their students in such a rapidly changing environment?

Problem Statement

As the world grows more interconnected, and as educational systems evolve in response to technological advancements and shifting societal norms, the development of ethical leadership and values among students has become even more critical. Despite the emphasis on character development within Islamic educational settings, there has been a lack of comprehensive, empirical research on how ethical leadership, value development, and character-based learning can be systematically integrated into the daily experiences of 'santri.' Existing literature on character education often focuses on general educational systems and overlooks the unique context of Islamic boarding schools, where students are simultaneously engaged in religious and secular learning. Thus, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these key educational components can be effectively combined to foster character development within the framework of pesantren.

While some studies have examined the role of leadership in character education, few have focused specifically on the impact of ethical leadership in religious institutions, particularly Islamic schools. Furthermore, there is a need to explore the role of students' personal experiences in mediating these educational processes. It is essential to understand how these experiences—whether through interactions with teachers, mentors, or peers, or through immersion in religious rituals and community life—affect the internalization of values and the development of ethical behavior.

Therefore, this study aims to address these gaps by proposing a model that integrates ethical leadership, value development, and character-based learning within the context of pesantren, mediated by the lived experiences of 'santri.' By doing so, the study seeks to offer insights into how Islamic education can better equip its students to face the moral challenges of the modern world.

Research Gap

While there exists substantial literature on character education, much of this research has been focused on Western educational models and secular settings, leaving a notable gap in the context of Islamic education. In particular, the role of ethical leadership within pesantren has not been adequately explored, especially in relation to how it influences the development of character and the internalization of values among 'santri.' Previous research has often examined leadership in terms of management or organizational frameworks, but has rarely connected it to the moral and spiritual dimensions that are central to Islamic education.

Moreover, there is insufficient exploration of how value development is cultivated in a religious context like pesantren, and how this development is influenced by students' day-to-day experiences in the pesantren environment. Students in pesantren engage in a unique set of practices, such as religious rituals, community service, and mentorship under Islamic scholars, all of which are integral to their personal growth. However, these experiences have not been studied in depth to determine their impact on students' character development. This research seeks to fill this gap by focusing on the interrelationship between ethical leadership, value development, character-based learning, and students' experiences within the pesantren environment.

Research Questions

The study is guided by several core research questions that aim to understand how ethical leadership, value development, and character-based learning contribute to the holistic development of 'santri.' Specifically, the research questions are:

1. How does ethical leadership influence character development among 'santri'?
This question examines the role of pesantren leaders in modeling and promoting ethical behavior among students, and how their leadership styles impact the overall character formation of 'santri.'
2. What is the role of value development in shaping the ethical behavior and character of 'santri'?
This inquiry explores how the deliberate teaching of values such as integrity, honesty, and social responsibility is integrated into the educational practices of pesantren, and how these values shape the personal and moral growth of students.
3. How do students' personal experiences mediate the relationship between ethical leadership, value development, and character-based learning?
This question addresses the role of the students' lived experiences—whether through interactions with peers, engagement with community service, or participation in religious activities—in shaping their character and internalizing the ethical and moral lessons taught in pesantren.

Objective of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to propose a comprehensive model of character development for 'santri' that highlights the interconnectedness of ethical leadership, value development, and character-based learning, with students' personal experiences serving as a critical mediating factor. The study seeks to demonstrate how these elements interact in shaping the moral and ethical character of students in Islamic boarding schools, providing a framework that educators and policymakers can use to enhance the effectiveness of character education in pesantren. By doing so, this research aspires to contribute to the development of more ethical leaders who are not only knowledgeable in religious and secular subjects but also well-equipped to navigate the complex moral challenges of the modern world.

Significance of the Study

This research is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to the academic literature on character education in Islamic contexts, providing a detailed exploration of the unique pedagogical processes within pesantren. Second, it offers practical insights for pesantren leaders and educators, helping them refine their strategies for nurturing ethical leadership and moral development among their students. Lastly, the proposed model of character development has broader implications for educational systems globally, especially in regions where ethical leadership and value-based education are becoming increasingly important in shaping the future of societies.

II. METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the complex and multifaceted nature of character development in Islamic educational settings, specifically within pesantren. Qualitative research is particularly suited for investigating the depth and richness of human experiences, behaviors, and social phenomena (Creswell, 2013). Given the exploratory nature of the research questions, a qualitative approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how ethical leadership, value development, and character-based learning intersect and how these elements are mediated by students' lived experiences. The aim is to capture the perspectives of both educators and students, providing a holistic view of the educational processes that influence character development in pesantren.

This approach is underpinned by constructivist epistemology, which posits that knowledge is constructed through social interactions and lived experiences (Charmaz, 2014). In the context of this study, constructivism allows for an in-depth examination of how students internalize values and develop ethical behavior through their engagement with the pesantren environment. The researchers approach this study with the assumption that the meanings and understandings of character development are socially constructed through interactions with peers, mentors, and community members, as well as through the personal and spiritual experiences that occur within the pesantren setting.

Participants

The participants in this study consist of two primary groups: santri (students) and educators/mentors within Islamic boarding schools. The selection of participants is purposive, as it is essential to focus on individuals who can provide relevant insights into the educational processes that shape character development in this context (Palinkas et al., 2015). The following criteria guide the selection of participants:

1. Santri (Students): The students selected for this study are current students of pesantren, ranging from first-year students to advanced students in their final years. These students have been involved in the pesantren system for at least one academic year to ensure that they have sufficient exposure to the educational environment and practices.
2. Educators/Mentors: The educators selected are teachers, Islamic scholars, and mentors who have significant experience in guiding and shaping the moral and ethical development of students in pesantren. This includes religious instructors, administrators, and senior students who play a role in peer mentoring.

A total of 30-40 participants will be selected, including 15-20 santri and 10-15 educators/mentors. This sample size is consistent with qualitative research guidelines, which prioritize depth of information over breadth (Guest et al., 2006). The participants will be drawn from a purposive sample of three pesantren in Indonesia, ensuring a diverse representation of experiences from different regional contexts.

Data Collection

To understand the complex and subjective nature of character development in pesantren, data will be collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. This multi-method approach is employed to capture both individual perspectives and group dynamics, providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under study (Flick, 2018).

First, Semi-Structured Interviews: In-depth interviews will be conducted with both santri and educators to explore their perceptions and experiences regarding ethical leadership, value development, and character-based learning. These interviews will be guided by a set of core questions but will remain flexible to allow participants to share their views in their own words. Interview questions will be developed based on the theoretical framework, focusing on: (1) The role of ethical leadership in shaping character. (2) The impact of value development on student behavior and decision-making. (3) The significance of character-based learning in the curriculum and daily life. (4) The influence of students' personal experiences within the pesantren environment. (5) Interviews will last between 45 minutes to 1 hour, depending on the depth of the responses.

Second, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Separate focus group discussions will be organized with groups of santri and educators. FGDs allow for the exploration of collective meanings and social dynamics, facilitating a discussion of shared values, experiences, and challenges in a group setting (Morgan, 1997). The FGDs will explore: (1) Shared understandings of ethical behavior and leadership. (2) Collective experiences of character-based learning. (3) The role of peer influence in character development.

Each focus group will consist of 6 to 8 participants and will be conducted in a relaxed, informal environment to encourage open and honest discussion. The discussions will be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Third, Participant Observation: The researchers will conduct non-participant observation in the pesantren to gain insights into the everyday practices, routines, and interactions that contribute to character development. Observation will focus on key areas such as: (1) Classroom interactions, including how ethical lessons are taught. (2) Religious practices and rituals, such as prayers, community service, and spiritual guidance. (3) Informal interactions among students and between students and teachers.

This observational data will provide context for the interview and focus group findings, allowing for a deeper understanding of the educational environment and its role in shaping character.

Data Analysis

The data will be analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative data analysis method that allows for the identification of patterns or themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis involves the following steps:

1. Familiarization with the Data: The researchers will first read and re-read the interview and FGD transcripts, along with field notes from observations, to become thoroughly familiar with the data.
2. Coding: Initial codes will be generated from the data, which will involve identifying significant phrases, ideas, or statements that relate to the research questions. These codes will be developed inductively, meaning that the researchers will not impose predetermined categories but will allow the codes to emerge from the data itself (Charmaz, 2014).
3. Theme Development: After coding, the researchers will group related codes together into broader themes. Themes might relate to areas such as the role of leadership, the importance of values in education, the influence of student experiences, or the integration of ethical teachings into daily life.
4. Interpretation: The researchers will interpret the findings in relation to the research questions and the theoretical framework of the study. The analysis will be framed within existing literature on ethical leadership, character education, and Islamic pedagogy.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are of paramount importance in qualitative research, particularly when working with vulnerable populations such as students. This study will adhere to the following ethical guidelines:

1. Informed Consent: All participants will be fully informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Consent forms will be obtained from all participants, and confidentiality will be ensured.
2. Confidentiality: The identity of participants will be kept confidential, and all data will be anonymized. Pseudonyms will be used in all published reports.
3. Researcher Reflexivity: The researchers will reflect on their own biases and positionality in relation to the study, ensuring that these do not influence the data collection or analysis process.

4. Respect for Participants: The researchers will maintain a respectful and empathetic stance toward participants, ensuring that their voices are heard and accurately represented in the findings.

Reliability and Validity

To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, the study will employ triangulation, using multiple data sources (interviews, focus groups, observations) to cross-check and validate the results. Additionally, member checking will be used, whereby participants are asked to review and verify the accuracy of the findings based on their own perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of the Results

This section presents the findings derived from the thematic analysis of the data, focusing on the influence of ethical leadership, value development, and character-based learning on the character development of santri in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). The analysis revealed several key themes that shed light on the educational processes in pesantren and how they contribute to the moral and ethical formation of students. These themes include: (1) The Role of Ethical Leadership in Shaping Character, (2) The Impact of Value Development in Character Education, (3) The Influence of Character-Based Learning, and (4) The Mediation of Students' Personal Experiences in Shaping Ethical Behavior.

The findings are discussed in the context of existing literature on character education, ethical leadership, and Islamic pedagogy, with a focus on how these elements intersect in shaping the moral identity of students in pesantren.

1. The Role of Ethical Leadership in Shaping Character

A dominant theme that emerged from the data was the profound influence of ethical leadership in shaping the character of santri. Participants consistently emphasized that pesantren leaders (such as religious teachers, mentors, and administrators) serve as role models for students in both academic and moral realms. According to the findings, the leadership styles practiced in pesantren are typically centered on moral authority, personal integrity, and the cultivation of a spiritual connection with students. These leaders are expected to exemplify Islamic values, including honesty, humility, compassion, and justice.

The impact of ethical leadership was evident in how students internalized these values in their everyday lives. For instance, one of the educators explained, "The way we conduct ourselves as teachers is seen and felt by the students. If we model honesty, discipline, and respect for others, they will emulate these behaviors in their own lives." Similarly, several students noted that their ethical decision-making and attitudes towards others were deeply influenced by the guidance and example set by their mentors.

This finding is in line with previous studies, which suggest that ethical leadership fosters a culture of trust and respect, crucial components for the moral development of students (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). Furthermore, moral modeling is critical in the Islamic context, where the teacher-student relationship is often seen as sacred, with the teacher expected to embody the principles of Islam in both their professional and personal conduct (El-Amin, 2012).

2. The Impact of Value Development in Character Education

Another prominent theme that emerged was the integral role of value development in the character formation of santri. In pesantren, the process of value development is not limited to the classroom but extends to everyday practices, rituals, and community interactions. The curriculum in pesantren is designed to foster key Islamic values such as integrity, social responsibility, patience, and respect for others. Students engage in both formal and informal learning processes that promote these values, often through dialogue, religious discussions, and practical applications within the pesantren community.

For example, one of the participants described how a routine practice in the pesantren, such as mutual assistance during community service projects, instilled in students a sense of collective responsibility and empathy towards others. "When we work together on community projects, I learn the importance of helping others and making sure everyone is treated with respect," one santri noted. Similarly, peer mentoring—where older students mentor younger ones—was seen as an effective method for reinforcing these values and providing a living example of ethical behavior.

The findings highlight that value development in pesantren is deeply interconnected with the moral teachings of Islam, which emphasize a comprehensive ethical framework for individuals to live by. According to

the Qur'an and Hadith, values such as compassion, justice, and honesty are seen not just as moral imperatives but as foundational elements of a good life. These findings resonate with the work of scholars such as Ryan & Lickona (2013), who argue that character education should focus not only on moral reasoning but also on moral action, as demonstrated through concrete behaviors and practices.

3. The Influence of Character-Based Learning

The third theme that emerged from the analysis was the critical role of character-based learning in shaping the moral and ethical development of students. In pesantren, character education is not a separate subject but is integrated into the everyday learning process. Students learn about character through direct instruction, but more importantly, through experiential learning that takes place both inside and outside the classroom.

For instance, religious rituals such as daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, and participation in religious lectures and discussions were identified as central to the development of personal integrity and self-discipline. Students reported that these practices helped them cultivate a sense of self-control and responsibility. "By following religious practices, I feel more disciplined and in control of my emotions," one participant stated. Additionally, character-based learning in pesantren is facilitated by the close-knit community environment, which fosters values of cooperation, solidarity, and respect for others. These values are not only taught in the classroom but are also enacted through daily interactions, such as communal meals, group study sessions, and collaborative activities. The immersion in this morally and ethically charged environment enables students to internalize these values in a way that transcends theoretical learning.

This aligns with Lickona's (1991) work on character education, which emphasizes that character development is best achieved through active learning experiences that encourage students to practice ethical behavior in real-life situations. Similarly, Kohlberg's (1984) theory of moral development highlights the importance of moral action in reinforcing ethical values, a principle clearly evident in the practices within pesantren.

4. The Mediation of Students' Personal Experiences

The final key theme that emerged was the mediation of students' personal experiences in shaping their ethical behavior and character. Students' individual journeys—shaped by personal challenges, interactions with peers, and the mentorship they receive—play a crucial role in how they internalize the values taught within pesantren.

Many students reported that their character development was significantly influenced by the mentorship they received from senior students and teachers, who provided both moral guidance and practical advice on how to handle real-life situations. One student shared, "My mentor taught me how to stay calm and make good decisions, even when I'm angry or upset. His guidance helped me grow as a person."

Additionally, the experiential learning that students engage in—whether through participating in religious events, community service, or peer interactions—shapes their ethical understanding and moral growth. This is consistent with Dewey's (1938) philosophy of experiential education, which asserts that individuals learn most effectively when they are actively engaged in meaningful, real-world experiences that prompt reflection and personal growth.

Conclusion of the Discussion

The findings from this study underscore the integral role that ethical leadership, value development, character-based learning, and students' personal experiences play in fostering the moral and ethical development of santri in pesantren. The study highlights that character development is not a linear or isolated process but rather a dynamic and interactive one, shaped by both institutional structures (such as ethical leadership and value-based teaching) and individual experiences within the pesantren community.

These findings also emphasize the importance of creating a holistic educational environment that integrates character education into all aspects of student life. By doing so, pesantren can foster students who are not only knowledgeable in religious and secular subjects but who are also equipped to navigate the ethical challenges of the modern world with integrity, empathy, and responsibility.

IV. CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings

This study sought to explore and develop a comprehensive model for the character development of santri in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), with a specific focus on the roles of ethical leadership, value development,

and character-based learning, all mediated by students' personal experiences. The findings reveal that these components play crucial and interconnected roles in shaping the moral and ethical growth of students within the pesantren context.

Ethical leadership, manifested through the actions and guidance of educators and mentors, significantly influences students' ethical decision-making and behavior. The leadership styles practiced by pesantren educators, who act as moral exemplars, foster an environment where students internalize values such as honesty, compassion, and social responsibility. Moreover, value development, which is intricately woven into the fabric of daily life in pesantren, encourages students to embody these ethical values in both their personal and communal lives. Character-based learning, which extends beyond traditional classroom settings, fosters self-discipline, integrity, and moral action. Finally, the personal experiences of students—shaped by peer interactions, mentorship, and involvement in religious and community-based activities—mediate and enhance their ethical development.

Through the integration of these elements, this study proposes a model of character development for santri that emphasizes the importance of a holistic, context-specific educational approach to moral formation. The role of pesantren leaders, curriculum design, and students' lived experiences must be seen as interconnected factors that together contribute to the creation of ethically grounded individuals capable of navigating the moral complexities of the modern world.

Implications

1. Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study offer significant theoretical contributions to the literature on character education and ethical leadership within the context of Islamic education. First, by linking ethical leadership with the moral and character development of students, this study extends the work of Leithwood & Jantzi (2000), who argued that leadership shapes the culture of an educational institution. This research provides empirical evidence that leadership in pesantren is a pivotal force that directly influences the character formation of santri.

Additionally, the integration of value development and character-based learning in a religious context adds new depth to the theoretical understanding of how character is cultivated in Islamic education. It complements the work of Ryan & Lickona (2013), who emphasize the importance of moral actions in character development, and Kohlberg (1984), whose theories highlight the role of moral action and ethical reasoning. By emphasizing experiential learning and the importance of student experiences, this study further builds on Dewey's (1938) theories of experiential education, illustrating how religious and community-based experiences can facilitate moral learning in Islamic educational contexts.

Thus, this study provides a framework for future research on character development in Islamic educational settings and offers a deeper understanding of how ethical leadership and value-based learning interact in shaping students' moral identities.

2. Practical Implications

The practical implications of this study are multifaceted and can directly inform the pedagogical strategies and practices within pesantren. First, the findings underscore the critical need for ethical leadership in pesantren. Educational leaders must actively engage in modeling ethical behavior and provide clear moral guidance for students. This calls for the development of professional development programs for educators that focus on ethical leadership and its impact on students' character.

Moreover, the findings suggest that curriculum development should integrate character education more explicitly, combining religious teachings with practical applications of ethical values. Programs that encourage students to practice values such as compassion, integrity, and social responsibility, through activities like community service and peer mentoring, should be expanded. These programs are not only beneficial in enhancing students' personal growth but also in fostering a stronger sense of community and collective responsibility.

Finally, pesantren should consider enhancing students' engagement in activities that connect learning with lived experiences, such as group discussions, collaborative projects, and community outreach. These experiences are instrumental in helping students internalize the values and lessons they encounter in formal education.

3. Managerial Implications

From a managerial perspective, the findings of this study carry significant implications for the leadership and administration of pesantren. Educational leaders must recognize that the role of a mentor extends beyond traditional teaching; it includes cultivating a moral and ethical framework for students. Managers and administrators should develop structures that support the integration of ethical leadership into all levels of the

educational system, including teacher training, leadership development programs, and policy initiatives. This will ensure that ethical leadership permeates the entire institution and becomes part of its core values.

Furthermore, effective management of character-based learning requires creating an educational environment that prioritizes both academic excellence and ethical formation. This can be achieved by fostering an institutional culture that values ethical behavior, social responsibility, and personal integrity, creating a school atmosphere where students are encouraged to act according to their values, both inside and outside the classroom. Mentorship programs and peer-led initiatives should be formalized, with senior students given more active roles in guiding younger students through ethical challenges.

Administrators must also invest in continuous evaluation and reflection processes, regularly assessing the effectiveness of character education programs. Implementing regular feedback loops—through surveys, interviews, and observation—will ensure that the pesantren remains responsive to students' needs and continues to evolve as a moral and ethical learning community.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study opens several avenues for future research. While it offers valuable insights into the role of ethical leadership and value development in pesantren, future studies could explore how these elements are applied across different regions or countries with varying socio-cultural contexts. Comparative studies between pesantren and other religious educational institutions may reveal additional factors that contribute to character development. Additionally, future research could examine the long-term impact of the character development model proposed in this study, investigating how students who undergo this holistic moral education fare in their professional and personal lives after leaving the pesantren. Longitudinal studies could provide insights into the lasting effects of ethical leadership and character-based learning on individuals and communities.

Finally, exploring the role of technology in supporting character education could be a fruitful area for investigation, particularly as digital tools and platforms become increasingly integrated into educational practices. Research on how online learning environments can complement traditional character education might offer new perspectives on how to foster ethical behavior in modern contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that the development of santri's character in pesantren is intricately shaped by ethical leadership, value development, character-based learning, and students' personal experiences. By examining these factors in detail, the study offers a comprehensive model for understanding how character is nurtured in Islamic education, highlighting the need for an integrated, holistic approach to character education. Theoretical, practical, and managerial implications point to the importance of ethical leadership, curriculum integration, and community-based learning experiences in fostering morally responsible individuals capable of making meaningful contributions to society. As such, this research provides a valuable contribution to the literature on character education and offers actionable insights for educators, leaders, and policymakers committed to enhancing the moral formation of students in pesantren and similar educational settings.

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