

Transformational Leadership as a Strategy for Internalizing Integrity: A Study at Nuurul Fikri Integrated Islamic Elementary School

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ABSTRACT

Good leadership depends on a principal's ability to model integrity for the school community, since educational effectiveness cannot be measured by academic achievement alone but also by a leader's capacity to instill honesty through consistent behavior. However, most studies on transformational leadership focus on its impact on teacher performance or student achievement, with limited attention to principals' exemplary behavior as a strategy for internalizing integrity in Islamic elementary education. This research tackles that gap by evaluating transformational leadership built on the principal's exemplary behaviour as an approach for internalizing integrity at an integrated Islamic primary school. This study employs a qualitative research method, in which data were collected from the principal, teachers, and parents at SDIT Nuurul Fikri through purposive sampling, then analyzed through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions, which were validated through source triangulation and methodological triangulation. The results reveal that internalization of integrity may be accomplished via three reinforcing dimensions: understanding the good which is anchored in the siddiq character of the Prophet Muhammad; experiencing the good where honesty should start from the leaders; and performing the good which is done through regular practice. The results imply that school leadership programs should mix modeling-based approaches with formal character education, and provide practical guidelines for principal training in faith-based schools.

1. INTRODUCTION

The "golden age" of character development is considered the elementary education stage, with the values taught at this level having a greater tendency to take root and extend into adulthood compared to character-building efforts at higher education levels. The job of the elementary school principle as a leader and role model is very important since pupils of this age are at a period of moral development when they intensely imitate authority figures. Educational institutions are the ideal settings for transmission of information as well as formation of character and moral integrity via absorption of ideals. Visionary leadership based on integrity is able to provide a conducive learning atmosphere and improve student learning outcomes (Amatullah et al., 2025; Pietsch et al., 2025; Richardson & Khawaja, 2025) thereby increasing the quality of education. Transformational leadership has four main characteristics: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. The first dimension is the core of the educational leadership process, which is ideal influence and integrity (Khoirunnisaa' & Maunah, 2021). This dimension is a model for all school members, supporting work motivation, teacher well-being, and positive school culture, where integrity as a reflection of social responsibility and consistency between words and actions needs to be continuously built through structured programs (Tuhuteru et al., 2023). However, the reality shows a very contrasting gap between the implementation of integrity values through leadership by example that has not been optimal and the leadership practices of school principals that are transactional, more on administrative and short-term academic achievements (Effendi & Sahertian, 2022; Tran et al., 2023). At the national level, KPK statistics in March 2026 reported 694 corruption charges against district and city administrations (Data KPK, 2026), and this trend continued throughout 2026 alone, with 10 additional regional chiefs captured in KPK sting

operations (Tribunnews, 2026). It is important to mention that these leaders are graduates of Indonesia's formal education system. Thus, when leaders do not provide an example, the values taught in the classroom do not have an echo in real life (Efendi et al., 2023). Between these ideal circumstances and reality there is a differential which leads to complicated and linked effects. This is a contradiction of education: the creation of intellectual people has not been matched by the development of character based on integrity (Haryanto et al., 2022; Umar et al., 2021). This situation indicates that leadership not grounded in values will hinder the process of character internalization, so that the values taught in the classroom are not genuinely internalized in daily life (Efendi et al., 2023). Furthermore, it weakens students' character and fosters a permissive attitude toward unethical behavior, even though the effectiveness of character education depends heavily on the consistency of leaders' exemplary conduct as role models (Löper & Hellmich, 2024).

Theoretically, transformational leadership (Burns, 1978; Bass & Riggio, 2005) asserts that leaders are not only oriented toward organizational goals but also enhance the moral quality of both leaders and followers through changes in values, attitudes, and behaviors, with the "idealized influence" dimension having the most significant impact on shaping a school culture of integrity, building trust, loyalty, and character (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Mahardika et al., 2024). According to Lickona (1991), the internalization of values occurs through the integration of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action, which are formed not instantly but through repeated practice. The present challenges within education, such as the decline of moral values due to global influences (Kahfi et al., 2021; Tri Mulyanto et al., 2021) and the demands of the Pancasila Student Profile which underscores that value internalization cannot be optimal without the leadership of principals to bring these values to life in a school culture and daily practice, create a need to develop a transformational leadership model based on good examples that is increasingly urgent. But despite this timeliness, there remains a clear gap in the literature. Transformational leadership has been researched in a number of studies as a factor influencing teacher effectiveness and school achievement. However, most of the research still considers integrity and role model as extra characteristics, not as a core and clearly operationalized feature. For example, Hallinger et al. (2025) found high association between leadership and teacher effectiveness, but not included moral aspects extensively. This gap highlights the requirement of transformational leadership style with integrity and exemplary conduct as the basic base for education rather than a secondary consequence, particularly considering Islamic elementary education. Based on this gap, this study addresses the following research question: How is the transformational leadership based on the example behaviour of the principal utilized as a strategy for internalizing the concept of integrity at Nuurul Fikri Gandusari Integrated Islamic Elementary School? The inclusion of the exemplary leadership characteristic as a primary and not peripheral aspect has the potential to provide a more significant theoretical and practical contribution to the building of models of Islamic educational leadership (Armiyanti et al., 2023). This study aims to analyze the role of transformational leadership based on the principal's exemplary behavior as a strategy for internalizing the value of integrity at Nuurul Fikri Integrated Islamic Elementary School, which was selected due to its strong track record in the systematic and sustainable development of student character.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design. The use of a qualitative approach is grounded in the need to gain an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of transformational leadership in the process of internalizing character values as it naturally occurs in the field (Sugiyono, 2017). The selection of case study method was based on the objective of this research which is to get an in-depth knowledge of the implementation of transformational leadership with the principal's example behaviour as a technique for internalizing the value of integrity in the

real-world environment of SDIT Nuurul Fikri. This research was undertaken at SDIT Nuurul Fikri Gandusari Trenggalek East Java. This school was selected for the following reasons: (1) this school has the ability to integrate the character value of integrity into its educational program and organizational culture; (2) the phenomenon of transformational leadership, especially the exemplary aspect, is interesting to study in relation to the process of internalizing the value of integrity; and (3) the diversity of student characteristics makes this school rich and representative to explore the application of adaptive transformational leadership. The study subjects were recruited by purposive sampling. The number of informants was three, namely the principal as the main informant, a teacher as the primary informant, and a parent as the supporting informant. The principal was chosen as the key informant because of their central role in the practices of transformational leadership and exemplary behavior, the focus of this study, while the teacher was selected due to their direct involvement in implementing integrity policies and programs at the school, as well as their dual role vice principals for curriculum. The parent was involved as a supporting informant to provide an external perspective on how the principal's exemplary leadership is perceived and internalized in the daily life of the school. The three research subjects are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Subjects

No	Code	Role	Quantity
1	INF-1	Principal (Key Informant)	1
2	INF-2	Teacher (Primary Informant)	1
3	INF-3	Parent (Supporting Informant)	1

Data collection was conducted using three complementary techniques, namely in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis, which were employed simultaneously to ensure that the data obtained reinforced one another. In-depth interviews were used as the primary technique to explore the informants' understanding, beliefs, and experiences regarding the principal's exemplary role in internalizing the value of integrity. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format with the principal, teacher, and the parent, lasting 30–60 minutes and recorded using an audio recorder with the informants' consent. Participatory observation was used to directly observe the exemplary practices of school principals and teachers in daily school activities, such as welcoming students, conducting ceremonies and morning assemblies, and holding weekly faculty meetings, in order to obtain contextual data regarding the consistency between the school principal's words and actions. The researcher documented relevant behaviors and interactions in field notes, including photographic documentation of activities during the observation process. A documentary study was conducted by examining curriculum documents containing the value of integrity, minutes of weekly teachers' meetings, and documentation of school activities, to confirm and supplement the data from the interviews and observations. The coding and thematic analysis processes were supported by ATLAS.ti software, which was used to organize interview excerpts, develop codes and thematic categories, and generate thematic network visualizations (Figure 1 in the results). The data analysis process followed the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), which comprises three stages that occur simultaneously: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions and verification. During data reduction, the researcher picked data that relates to the three aspects of internalization of integrity values, which are: "knowing the good," "feeling the good," and "acting the good." The data were then presented descriptively in narratives using snippets from the interviews. The empirical findings were anchored to the theoretical framework of transformational leadership by Bass & Riggio (2005) and Lickona's (1991) theory of character value internalization, conclusions were drawn and verified by cross-checking data from various informants and data collection techniques. Source and methodological triangulation were used to assure data validity. The credibility of information from different informants was compared to establish the consistency of opinions on the exemplary practices of school leaders for triangulation of sources.

Data triangulation was done by comparing data from interviews, observations and document analysis of the same sources ensuring that the findings are not based on a single data type but validated from different perspectives and methods of data collection. The use of these two types of triangulation allowed the study to achieve a greater level of certainty that the results related to the internalization of integrity values reflected situations that actually occur in the field, and were not simply subjective constructions from one source or one collection of data. The entire process of conducting interviews, gathering documentation, and attaching photographs of school activities in this study received official permission from SDIT Nuurul Fikri, ensuring that the research was conducted legally and in accordance with research ethics.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

This section presents research findings on transformational leadership based on the principal's exemplary behavior as a strategy for internalizing the value of integrity at SDIT Nuurul Fikri, obtained through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and a review of documents involving the principal, teachers, and parents. The collected data was then analyzed using thematic network analysis to identify patterns and interrelationships among categories in the process of internalizing the value of integrity. Network analysis of the research data produced a map of major themes, as presented in Figure 1. This map shows that the central theme of transformational leadership based on exemplary behavior, as a strategy for internalizing the value of integrity is divided into three main categories that are interrelated, namely internalization in the aspect of "knowing the good," internalization in the aspect of "feeling the good," and internalization in the aspect of "acting the good." These three categories serve as the framework for reporting the results in the following subsections.

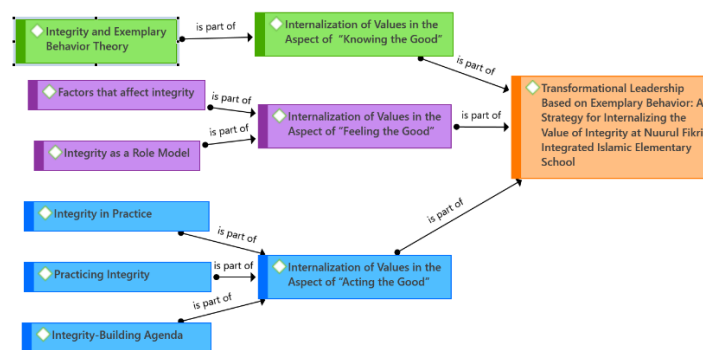


Figure 1. Data Analysis Network

Based on data analysis, this study identified three key strategies that reinforce one another in the process of internalizing integrity values through role modeling at SDIT Nuurul Fikri.

3.1 Internalization of Values in the Aspect of "Knowing the Good"

Findings regarding the aspect of knowledge indicate that the internalization of integrity at SDIT Nuurul Fikri is built upon a conceptual foundation rooted in theories of integrity and exemplary behavior. This foundation is specifically linked to prophetic exemplarity, that is, the traits of the Prophet Muhammad SAW that serve as the primary reference, particularly the trait of *siddiq* (honesty). INF 1 stated that *"honesty is part of the character we emulate from the Prophet's traits... what we take is his siddiq, his honesty"* (INF-1, June 23, 2026). This interview was corroborated by INF 2, who noted that *"...there are sirah or stories of exemplary conduct related to what we want to convey to the children; from the class earlier, there were quite a few stories, advice, and so on"*

(INF-2, June 26, 2026). At SDIT Nuurul Fikri, a curriculum has also been developed to foster integrity, although its implementation is currently hampered by time constraints and the volume of material to be covered. N1 stated, *"We once developed a curriculum in which the 25 prophets and messengers were included in the children's lessons... because, as I mentioned earlier, history has great power to shape a person's character"* (INF-1, 23 June 2026). This interview was corroborated by INF-2, who stated, *"We did manage to put together a program recently; for example, this week we're discussing honesty, so the teachers in each class will look for sirah or stories about honesty"* (INF-2, 26 June 2026). The conceptual basis was then incorporated into the educational program on integrity. This ensures that the value of integrity is expressly included in the learning framework, and not only implicitly. Alongside the interview sources, a study of curricular papers relevant to integrity given by the headmaster and class teachers was also used.

3.2 Internalization of Values in the Aspect of "Feeling the Good"

This element is the category with the largest network of results and is focused on the topic of integrity as a role model. The findings indicate that a belief in the importance of integrity is fostered through the principle that honesty begins with leaders, as evidenced by the principal's direct involvement in instilling integrity. INF-1 explains the benchmark for exemplary leadership, *"So the benchmark is this: if we expect, desire, and aspire for our school, whether it be the teachers or the students to be honest, it cannot begin unless it starts with us as leaders"* (INF-1, June 23, 2026). This was reinforced by an interview with INF-3: *"Character building, responsibility, and honesty are closely linked to the principal because the principal is, after all, the leader. One example of this is the morning arrival routine... the children must arrive before 7 a.m."* (INF-3, June 24, 2026). Interestingly, a teacher's integrity does not only occur in the school environment; instead, it transcends the school environment: *"That's why these friends are teachers not only at school but also outside of school; when they meet children, the children will call them 'ustadzah' and so on"* (INF-1, June 23, 2026). This means that instructors are supposed to always be a positive role model in public as well as in private. Ultimately, teachers are positioned as idols and role models for students, based on the principle that honesty is demonstrated through actions, not merely through words. This is reinforced by N2, who stated that *"the principal often emphasizes the importance of setting a positive example for the children to motivate us as teachers as a behavior we must exemplify so that our students will follow our lead"* (N2, June 26, 2026). In addition, the INF 1 also emphasized leading by *"The principle is this: we are like parents, and the students are like children. Just as a father is close to his children, we want to be close to them, and we hope they will look up to their male and female teachers as role models."* (INF-1, June 23, 2026). This was reinforced by INF-2: *"For some of the teachers we assign to duty, the principal's principle is that he must arrive earlier than the teacher on duty"* (INF-2, June 26, 2026).



Figure 3. The principal joins in welcoming the students

3.3 Internalization of Values in the Aspect of "Acting the Good"

The "action" aspect demonstrates how beliefs and knowledge about integrity are manifested in real-life daily practices through three strategic approaches. First, integrity is instilled by paying

attention to the context in which integrity is practiced and by creating an honest environment, including being mindful of the situation when conveying moral messages and using others' experiences to instill integrity as a form of learning. *"The important thing is that we can gauge when the children are receptive to what we want to convey; the situation must be right for the moral messages we want to convey otherwise, the children will get bored"* (INF-1, 23 June 2026). Second, the implementation of integrity is carried out through benefit-based educational consequences, inspiration from the principal to teachers, and reprimands for teachers regarding integrity as a form of continuous reinforcement and correction. INF-1 stated, *"Consequences are synonymous with responsibility. When a child makes a mistake, there are consequences; there is responsibility. It's not merely a punishment."* (INF-1, June 23, 2026). INF-2 also stated, *"So, to cultivate a sense of responsibility and integrity in the children, we use classroom rules and enforce them consistently, but these rules also provide beneficial consequences"* (INF-2, June 24, 2026). Third, the school has developed a structured integrity-building program, including weekly meetings as a means of fostering synergy and evaluation, conveying the values of integrity through stories and moral tales, introducing integrity through the biographies of the Prophet and his Companions, instilling honesty in both formal and informal settings, and providing spiritual guidance for teachers to align with the school's vision and mission. Weekly meetings or evaluations as a means of instilling integrity in teachers were emphasized in an interview with the principal: *"Usually, for teacher activities, we meet at least once a week on Friday or Saturday to discuss and evaluate the week's activities"* (INF-1, June 23, 2026). INF-2 also stated, *"During our weekly training sessions or meetings, the principal reminds us to always improve our discipline"* (INF-2, June 26, 2026). In instilling the value of integrity in students, the principal is actively involved in school activities: *"As leaders, we bear full responsibility for all activities, both those of the teachers and those of our students so we really have to give it our all and be present at school as long as we're able to do so."* (INF-1, June 23, 2026). This was reinforced by INF-3: *"School principals usually talk about honesty, integrity, and values, but they tend to do so during ceremonies, assemblies, or perhaps on Fridays before physical education class."* (INF-3, June 24, 2026).



Figure 4. Conveying the value of integrity during a ceremony

DISCUSSION

The finding that the internalization of integrity at SDIT Nuurul Fikri is grounded in the *siddiq* trait of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) aligns with the "moral knowing" component in Lickona's (1991) framework, while also reflecting the concept of *uswah hasanah* in Islamic education, which frames the understanding of honesty not merely as a social norm, but as a theologically grounded value that is therefore more meaningful to students (Kurnia et al., 2025; Supriyadi et al., 2026). But contrasted to the two previous studies, this study conceptualizes religious foundations more specifically as enhancers of character and the understanding of integrity is linked to a single prophetic trait *siddiq* as the only and explicit reference leading to a more focused and easily internalized model of value understanding than general approaches to religious values. This knowledge base is further strengthened by the belief component where the assumption is that honesty

must begin with the leader, essentially the “idealized influence” aspect in Bass and Riggio’s transformational leadership theory. The results also confirm the evidence that the transformational leadership of the principal has a significant effect on students’ religious character (Hudaya & Rosyid, 2025). According to Bandura’s social learning theory, since the instructor is a role model, pupils acquire moral conduct mostly by seeing and imitating. However, several restricting factors also appeared, such as sporadic teacher commitment and the displacement of integrity related content by other curricular demands. This implies that we need not just individual exemplary conduct, but also institutional consistency. The novelty of this study lies in the finding that modeling effectiveness is not automatic or uniform across teachers, but depends on each teacher's individual commitment to using the principal's conduct as a behavioral reference. A second novelty emerges from the finding that teachers' role as role models extends beyond the classroom into their private and community lives, given the expectation that they maintain consistent integrity both inside and outside school. This expands Bandura's modeling principle typically examined only within formal school learning by demonstrating that value internalization through behavioral imitation occurs across settings (cross-setting modeling), a dimension not extensively explored in prior studies on transformational leadership and religious character, including Hudaya & Rosyid (2025), which focused solely on leadership influence within the school setting.

In the action dimension, three concrete strategies were identified instillation, implementation, and structured initiatives such as weekly meetings and spiritual guidance for teachers reflecting the individualized consideration and inspirational motivation dimensions of transformational leadership. This is in line with the findings that principal leadership is expressed in five strategies, namely modelling, habit formation, collaboration, strengthening school culture and monitoring and evaluation, with habit formation and exemplary leadership being the dominant pillars at UPT SDN Dermo II Bangil (Yanti Rosida et al., 2025). What is new here is the use of moral stories and the Prophet’s biography (Siroh Nabi) as narrative pedagogy which can be more effective in facilitating the internalisation of value than normative instruction alone, while the combination of affirmative and corrective approaches reaffirm Lickona’s (1991) requirement that values move from knowledge into lasting moral action. These three dimensions are not frequently separate but support each other in a loop. The idea that honesty must begin with the leaders is built upon the understanding of the prophetic example, and is translated into an organized and consistent habit development strategy. This shows that the integration of the integrity approach at SDIT Nuurul Fikri places outstanding leadership at the heart, not as an administrative addition of transformative leadership. The findings of this research provide insight into the link between transformational leadership and integrated Islamic elementary education. This study theoretically expands the notion that exemplary conduct is not merely a supplement of the “idealized influence” dimension but a basic mechanism that links cognitive knowledge and ideals genuinely represented in the day-to-day behaviour of the school community. This contribution, utilizing the paradigm offered by Bass & Riggio (2005) seeks to emphasize that exemplary leadership based on Islamic principles offers a more stable and genuine moral ground for Islamic educational institutions. This is achieved by bringing together the Western transformational leadership theory with the concept of *uswah hasanah* to develop a leadership paradigm that is more appropriate to the setting.

4. CONCLUSION

This research concludes that transformational leadership based on the exemplary behaviour of the principal has proven to be an effective strategy in internalizing the value of integrity at SDIT Nuurul Fikri. The internalization process takes place through the three dimensions that support each other and form a continuous cycle. In the domain of understanding (knowing the good), the conceptual basis of integrity is based on the prophetic exemplary aspect of the trait of the *siddiq* of

the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and is reinforced by curriculum content about honesty, although its implementation is still facing constraints regarding time and the amount of instructional material. In the value of conviction (feeling the good), the principle that honesty must start with leaders is the basis for the attitude of school principals and teachers who are required to be role models at all times both in schools and in public spaces, and the status of teachers as role models further strengthens the process of moral emulation among students. This conviction is expressed in the dimension of action (acting the good) through three concrete strategies: (1) creating an atmosphere conducive to the delivery of appropriate moral messages, (2) applying educational consequences as a means of reinforcing responsibility, (3) establishing a structured routine of activities such as weekly meetings, moral stories, and spiritual guidance for teachers. Theoretically, these findings support Lickona's (1991) model of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action and also support the importance of the 'idealized influence' dimension in Bass and Riggio's transformational leadership theory and Bandura's principle of modelling, which states that students learn from observing and imitating leaders and teachers. In practical terms, this study shows that the exemplary conduct of a principal cannot be seen as an additional administrative variable, but it must be operationalized as a core element of leadership that is applied holistically and simultaneously across all three dimensions and not restricted to only one. The constancy of exemplary behaviour of a leader based on Islamic ideals and reinforced via systematic and continuous practices has been demonstrated to be the key to effectively developing a culture of integrity in integrated Islamic primary schools. These results also highlight the need for institutional consistency in addressing barriers such as lack of teacher commitment and displacement of integrity-related material by other academic demands. Thus, the sustainability of this exemplar-based leadership paradigm might be a reference for the creation of genuine Islamic educational leadership in other educational institutions. The limitations of the present investigation are as follows. The results of this one case study, at one Islamic primary school, may not be generalized to other schools with varied cultures, leadership styles and socio-religious situations. However, the research had a small number of interviewees and its limitation provides detailed viewpoints. Future research is advised to use a multi-site or comparative case study approach across schools with different features to examine the transferability of this leadership style based on leading by example. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable for examining how the internalization of integrity evolves as students progress through different educational stages, while quantitative or mixed-methods approaches could help measure the relative strength of each dimension knowing, feeling, and acting in shaping students' character outcomes.

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