

## Contextual Mapping of Students' Leadership Traits for School Character Development Programs in Indonesia

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**ABSTRACT.** This study aims to map students' leadership traits within the context of school character development programs in Indonesia, addressing the absence of a systematic framework for identifying and integrating leadership characteristics into character education practices. Conducted as a qualitative case study, the research involved three secondary schools: SMP Islam Al-Ikhlas Cipete (South Jakarta), SMPIT Darojatul Uluum (Depok), and SMPIT Al-Husain (Tangerang), all selected for their active, character-based educational environments. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observations, and document analysis involving school principals, teachers, student organization advisors, and selected student leaders. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns of leadership traits across the three school contexts. The findings indicate that students demonstrate a range of core leadership traits, including responsibility, communication skills, initiative, empathy, and collaborative orientation, which emerge differently depending on school culture, mentorship practices, and program structure. The study also reveals contextual variations, including the influence of Islamic values, peer-led activities, and teacher modeling on leadership expression. The conclusion highlights that contextual mapping enables a more targeted, responsive approach to character development by aligning program components with students' existing leadership potential. The implications suggest that schools should adopt a structured leadership-trait identification model to inform program design, strengthen teacher mentoring strategies, and enhance student agency in character-building activities. The study further contributes to theoretical discussions on contextualized student leadership frameworks within character-based education in Indonesian secondary schools.

**Keywords:** *Character education development, Inclusive and ethical school culture, Student leadership traits, Youth agency in education*

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### INTRODUCTION

Leadership development in schools is increasingly recognized as a strategic foundation for shaping students' moral, social, and civic competencies in the 21st-century educational landscape (Davies & Davies, 2006; Walker & Loots, 2016; Tripses, 2021; Dimmock et al., 2021). As societies confront complex global challenges—from digital ethical dilemmas to polarization and weakening social cohesion—schools are expected not only to transmit knowledge but also to cultivate character and leadership capacities among students. In Indonesia, character education is not merely an educational enrichment; it is a national priority embedded in the philosophical and constitutional

mandate of building a dignified generation with integrity, responsibility, and collaborative skills (Retnawati et al., 2018; Effendi et al., 2020; Japar et al., 2024; Purwaningsih & Ridha, 2024). Therefore, mapping students' leadership traits becomes essential for informing how character development programs are structured, implemented, and evaluated in schools. A systematic understanding of students' leadership traits enables schools to design interventions that are contextually relevant, evidence-driven, and responsive to students' real developmental needs. Without such mapping, character education risks becoming normative, generic, or detached from students' authentic dispositions and potentials.

School leadership development and character education have long been interconnected in global educational research (Poerwanti & Marmoah, 2021; Gunada et al., 2024; Rai & Beresford-Dey, 2025). Leadership is no longer conceptualized merely as an adult role or a formal position (Tsarkos, 2024); instead, it is viewed as a set of learnable traits and capacities that can be nurtured from early adolescence. Middle school students, especially those aged 12–15, are at a crucial stage of identity formation, social exploration, and moral reasoning (Topolewska-Siedzik & Ciecuch, 2018; Klym-Guba & Ciecuch, 2019). This developmental phase provides fertile ground for instilling leadership traits such as initiative, responsibility, empathy, communication, ethical judgment, and collaborative problem solving. In Islamic educational institutions, leadership development is often integrated with spiritual and moral formation, emphasizing *akhlak* (character), *amanah* (responsibility), and *uswah* (exemplary conduct) as essential qualities of future leaders (Kasim & Yusoff, 2014; Astuti, 2024; Sulhan & Hakim, 2023; Ibrahim et al., 2025). However, despite growing awareness of the importance of leadership development, many schools struggle to conceptualize what student leadership truly means and how it should be mapped or measured (Eacott, 2011; Keeffe, 2014; Welsh et al., 2021). Leadership tends to be interpreted narrowly—often equated with merely formal student council roles—rather than understood as a distributed set of personal and interpersonal traits exhibited by students across diverse contexts.

Although many Indonesian schools have adopted character education programs, a fundamental gap persists: schools generally lack a systematic mapping of students' leadership traits (Jawas, 2017; Indra et al., 2020; Lumban Gaol, 2023). As a result, programs are often implemented without a clear understanding of students' starting points, strengths, or developmental needs. This lack of mapping undermines the relevance and effectiveness of character programs; schools may design activities that do not align with students' actual leadership profiles, thereby limiting opportunities for appropriate scaffolding, mentoring, or targeted development. At the three research sites—SMP Islam Al-Ikhlas Cipete (South Jakarta), SMPIT Darojatul Uluum (Depok), and SMPIT Al-Husain (Tangerang)—various leadership-related activities have been conducted, including extracurricular programs, student organizations, and Islamic character-based initiatives. However, none of the schools systematically documents or maps students' leadership traits as a baseline for program planning. This study thus addresses a critical gap: the lack of an empirical, contextualized understanding of the leadership traits students already possess, how these traits manifest, and how these insights can guide character development programs.

Although studies on student leadership have expanded across global and Southeast Asian contexts, very few have examined the mapping of contextual leadership traits within Indonesian Islamic middle schools using a qualitative multi-site case study approach (Lee et al., 2018; Rubiyantoro & Bush, 2024). Much of the existing research still concentrates on formal leadership positions, teacher perceptions, or conceptual discussions of character education rather than capturing students' leadership traits as they authentically emerge through daily behaviors, peer interactions, and school activities. Recent studies reveal similar limitations. For example, Budiharjo and Astutik (2024) demonstrate that Islamic leadership training can enhance certain leadership behaviors among students, yet their study does not establish a systematic baseline of students' leadership traits prior to program implementation. Meanwhile, Samudera and Supriyadi (2022) explore charismatic leadership characteristics at the elementary level but do not extend their analysis

to multi-school, context-bound behavioral patterns. Research in Islamic educational institutions also shows a strong emphasis on programmatic approaches rather than empirical trait identification. For instance, Hasanah et al. (2024) investigate situational leadership and value integration in shaping student discipline, while Baharun et al. (2023) highlight the role of organizational empowerment in developing leadership skills. However, both studies focus on leadership development mechanisms rather than mapping students' pre-existing traits across diverse school environments. Collectively, these findings indicate a persistent research gap: the absence of qualitative, grounded, multi-site investigations that systematically map students' leadership traits as the foundation for designing character development programs in Indonesian Islamic secondary schools. Without such contextually anchored research, character initiatives risk becoming top-down, generalized, and insufficiently responsive to students' actual developmental profiles.

Existing evidence underscores the importance of identifying leadership traits as a foundation for designing effective character education programs. Nashuha et al. (2019) found that teachers tend to interpret leadership traits based on behaviors observed in class and school activities, suggesting that leadership is dynamic and contextually grounded rather than fixed. Their study emphasizes the need for structured observation and mapping to identify students' leadership potential accurately. Meanwhile, Mubarak et al. (2024) argue that exemplary leadership, particularly within Islamic educational contexts, requires integrating moral and behavioral modeling into program design. Their findings highlight the need for character programs to be informed by students' actual dispositions and relational dynamics rather than abstract moral principles alone. These studies support the premise that understanding students' leadership traits through contextualized mapping can significantly enhance the design and alignment of character development initiatives. However, both studies also indicate that current practices are often fragmented and lack systematic methods for capturing comprehensive trait profiles. Thus, there is a strong evidence-based rationale for schools to adopt structured leadership trait mapping as part of their character education strategies.

The three research sites represent diverse yet comparable Islamic educational environments within the Greater Jakarta Area. SMP Islam Al-Ikhlas Cipete is located in a dynamic urban setting with high parental involvement, varied student backgrounds, and well-established extracurricular programs. SMPIT Darojatul Uluum in Depok embodies a semi-urban Islamic schooling environment with a strong emphasis on discipline, religious values, and community engagement. SMPIT Al-Husain in South Tangerang combines modern Islamic schooling approaches with an emphasis on active student participation and collaborative culture. Although these schools have implemented various character- and leadership-related programs, including student councils, mentoring systems, Islamic activities, and community service, none systematically document or map leadership traits at the student level. Teachers typically rely on observational impressions rather than structured assessments, and program designs are not consistently based on empirical data on student traits. This local context underscores the urgency of developing a contextually appropriate leadership trait mapping framework that reflects the cultural, religious, and pedagogical realities of Islamic secondary schools in Indonesia.

## **METHOD**

This research employed a qualitative approach with a multi-site case study design to explore and map students' leadership traits within authentic school environments. A qualitative approach was chosen because the study aims to understand leadership characteristics as they naturally emerge through real-life interactions, peer dynamics, and school culture. The multi-site case study design enabled an in-depth examination of three Islamic middle schools in the Greater Jakarta region: SMP Islam Al-Ikhlas in South Jakarta, SMPIT Darojatul Uluum in Depok, and SMPIT Al-Husain in South Tangerang, each representing a distinct organizational and cultural setting. These schools were selected purposively based on their implementation of character development programs, active student leadership activities, and the absence of prior systematic mapping of students' leadership

traits. Participants included students aged 12 to 15, homeroom teachers, guidance and counseling staff, and vice principals responsible for student affairs. Student participants were selected using purposive criteria based on observable involvement in leadership-related activities, teacher recommendations, and engagement in school programs. In contrast, the number of participants was determined to achieve data saturation and ensure the depth and richness of the information.

In this study, the researcher served as the primary instrument, planning the inquiry, conducting interviews, observing behaviors, interpreting findings, and constructing meaning from field data. To support systematic and rigorous data collection, several auxiliary instruments were used, including semi-structured interview guides tailored for students, teachers, and school administrators; observation sheets focusing on behavioral indicators of leadership traits such as initiative, responsibility, communication, empathy, and ethical decision-making; and document analysis checklists for reviewing policy documents, student portfolios, activity reports, and school records. Data were collected through three complementary techniques: in-depth interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit participants' experiences and perceptions regarding leadership behaviors observed in daily school life. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent. Non-participant observations were conducted across various school settings—including classrooms, hallways, extracurricular activities, and informal gatherings—to capture naturally occurring leadership behaviors. Meanwhile, school documents, such as program guidelines, activity logs, and student council records, were examined to enrich the contextual understanding and triangulate information gathered from interviews and observations.

The data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The process began with transcription and open coding of interview and observational data, followed by categorizing codes into clusters representing behavioral, interpersonal, and intrapersonal leadership traits. Data were then organized into matrices and visual displays to identify cross-site patterns and variations. Thematic analysis, assisted by qualitative analysis software such as NVivo or ATLAS.ti, was employed to ensure systematic coding, enhance transparency, and support deeper interpretation of emerging themes. Conclusions were verified through iterative comparison with raw data, field notes, and theoretical insights.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several validation strategies were implemented, including triangulation across sources, methods, and contexts; member checking by allowing participants to review and confirm interpretations; maintaining an audit trail that documented research decisions, coding processes, and analytic memos; and providing thick description to allow readers to understand the context and evaluate the transferability of findings. Referential adequacy was maintained by archiving selected raw data for verification. The research procedures followed a systematic sequence beginning with a preliminary study and literature review, gaining permissions from schools, developing instruments, conducting fieldwork, transcribing and coding data, performing cross-site analysis, constructing leadership trait maps, and synthesizing findings into a comprehensive qualitative report aligned with the objectives of mapping contextual leadership traits for character development programs.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Result**

A comparison of student leadership programs at three Islamic-based secondary schools: Al-Ikhlas Islamic Middle School in Cipete, Darojatul Uluum Islamic Middle School in Depok, and Al-Husain Islamic Middle School in Tangerang. This is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Comparison of Student Leadership Programs in Schools

Aspect	SMP Islam Al-Ikhlâs, Cipete (South Jakarta)	SMPIT Darajatul Uluum, Depok	SMPIT Al-Husain, Tangerang
Main Focus of the Leadership Program	Developing student agency and self-initiative	Character formation through peer mentoring	Value-based leadership grounded in Islamic ethics
Forms of Leadership Activities	Active student council, club management, and student-led study circles	Peer tutoring, mentoring groups, collaborative projects	Islamic leadership programs, structured religious activities, and character-based flagship programs
Most Distinct Student Characteristics	High initiative, collaborative communication	Strong empathy and willingness to help peers	Discipline, ethics, and adherence to values
Leadership Assessment Methods	Project portfolios, self-reflection	Behavioral observations, mentor reports	Character assessment using value-based rubrics
Student-Led Activities	Academic clubs, school events, social initiatives	Study groups, discussion forums, and class-based activities	Religious programs, daily Islamic routines, and school culture programs
Strengths of the Program	Provides a vast space for creativity and student agency	Strengthens peer relationships and social responsibility	Produces highly disciplined and value-driven students
Key Challenges	Maintaining consistent student participation	Variations in mentor capacity among students	Balancing discipline with student creativity
Highlighted Leadership Traits	Initiative, problem-solving, communication	Empathy, collaboration, responsibility	Integrity, discipline, value-based decision making
Observed Program Outcomes	Students become more independent and active in school initiatives	Students act effectively as peer helpers and mentors	Students demonstrate strong spiritual and moral discipline

Each school implements a different primary focus—from developing student agency and character building through peer mentoring to internalizing Islamic values—which is reflected in the variety of leadership activities, assessment methods, and the resulting student character. Furthermore, each institution faces specific challenges related to consistent participation, peer mentors' capacity, and the balance between discipline and creativity. Overall, this comparison demonstrates that student leadership programs are effective when designed to reflect students' needs and the school's value orientations.

The differences in primary focus across schools reflect varying philosophical orientations in developing student leadership. Al-Ikhlâs Islamic Junior High School in Cipete focuses on developing student agency and independence as a foundation for developing the character of young leaders. In contrast, Darajatul Uluum Islamic Junior High School in Depok adopts a relational approach through a peer mentoring system that aims to strengthen empathy and social responsibility. Al-Husain Islamic Junior High School in Tangerang, on the other hand, emphasizes internalizing values through Islamic ethics-based leadership as a framework for developing moral integrity. These differences illustrate that leadership program design needs to be aligned with institutional values and students' psychosocial developmental needs to achieve optimal effectiveness.

The leadership activities implemented by the three schools demonstrate significant variations in pedagogical approaches to facilitating student leadership experiences. Organization- and club-based activities developed by SMP Islam Al-Ikhlâs provide students with opportunities to practice managing activities, communicating, and making independent decisions. SMPIT Darajatul Uluum, on the other hand, adopts collaboration-based activities such as peer tutoring and group projects to foster solidarity, interpersonal skills, and social awareness. SMPIT Al-Husain integrates structured religious activities and character programs to emphasize the spiritual dimension and

instill long-term values. This variation demonstrates that compelling leadership experiences can be shaped through structural, relational, and value-based mechanisms.

The student characteristics emerging from each program reflect the extent to which the leadership approach implemented fosters specific behaviors and values. The program at SMP Islam Al-Ikhlâs produces students with high initiative and active leadership in school activities, although consistent participation remains a challenge. The mentoring system at SMPIT Darojatul Uluum fosters strong empathy and students' ability to act as peer mentors, though there is variation in mentors' capacities that need strengthening. Meanwhile, the values-based program at SMPIT Al-Husain produces students who are disciplined, have integrity, and are ethically oriented, but the school faces the challenge of balancing discipline with creativity. The overall impact suggests that the effectiveness of the leadership program is determined not only by the activities provided but also by the appropriateness of the approach, the assessments, and the students' characteristics.

## **Discussion**

A comparison between three schools, namely Al-Ikhlâs Islamic Junior High School in Cipete, Darojatul Uluum Islamic Junior High School in Depok, and Al-Husain Islamic Junior High School in Tangerang, shows that the orientation of student leadership programs is shaped differently according to the vision, values, and characteristics of the institution. Al-Ikhlâs Islamic Junior High School emphasizes student agency and independence, Darojatul Uluum Islamic Junior High School prioritizes character building through peer mentoring, while Al-Husain Islamic Junior High School emphasizes leadership grounded in Islamic values. This pattern aligns with the findings of Hapsari et al. (2024), who emphasized that student leadership development must be designed contextually and oriented towards the character, values, and needs of the school community. A similar emphasis was conveyed by Dang Minh (2025), who highlighted the importance of designing leadership programs that are sensitive to the institutional context, ensuring interventions are relevant and practical. However, Soleh and Supardi's (2023) conceptual findings offer a critical perspective: leadership models in Islamic education cannot be standardized because each school's culture and orientation are strongly influenced by it. Thus, standardization efforts may overlook the institution's uniqueness. Thus, while general principles for student leadership development can be referenced, their implementation must be tailored to each school's specific identity, values, and needs to achieve optimal effectiveness.

The range of leadership activities, from student councils (OSIS) and extracurricular clubs to study circles, peer tutoring, and even structured religious programs, demonstrates the diversity of pedagogical pathways for developing student leadership capacity in schools. This diversity emphasizes that leadership development cannot be reduced to the mere transfer of formal competencies but must be understood as a social and iterative learning process, as emphasized in the experiential learning framework, which places direct experience at the heart of developing communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills (Kim et al., 2015; Donovan & Hood, 2021; Brooks, 2024). Conceptually, Padron and Stone (2019) argue that communication skills, a foundation of leadership, can be enhanced through a problem-based learning approach that provides students with opportunities to practice communicating effectively in authentic situations. Meanwhile, Agirdag and Muijs' (2023) empirical findings reinforce this argument by showing that participation in student organizations and reflective activity programs significantly contributes to the development of leadership capacity by encouraging the internalization of values, decision-making, and the management of social relations. On the other hand, Torrico et al.'s (2025) study offers a contrasting perspective that complements the two previous findings, namely that leadership effectiveness does not derive solely from individual experience but also depends heavily on the dynamics of group-based learning, where role negotiation and collaboration are key. Thus, both conceptual approaches and empirical evidence agree that these activities make different yet complementary contributions to the comprehensive development of students' leadership competencies.

Differences in character outcomes, ranging from initiative and collaborative communication to empathy and mentoring skills, to discipline and the practice of Islamic values, indicate that each school's student leadership program design produces differential effects depending on its pedagogical focus. Conceptually, research by Jang et al. (2016) confirms that interventions emphasizing student agency, active participation, and self-reflection tend to produce students who are more independent, proactive, and take initiative. Conversely, research by DuBois et al. (2011) confirms that mentoring-based approaches and social-emotional learning are more effective in developing empathy, helping others, and social responsibility. From a moral development perspective, Hardy and Carlo (2011) state that activities that consistently integrate religious values and spiritual disciplines encourage the formation of more stable moral orientations and self-regulation. These findings indicate that character outcomes across the three schools reflect individual variations that reflect each school's program design: agency-based interventions foster independence, mentoring-based interventions strengthen social empathy, and values-based interventions produce moral consistency and student discipline.

The assessment mechanisms used by the three schools demonstrate an understanding that leadership evaluation needs to be formative, iterative, and involve multiple sources of information to capture the complexity of students' social and moral competency development. This mechanism aligns with the conceptual framework of authentic assessment, which emphasizes the use of concrete performance evidence, peer assessment, and self-reflection to facilitate deeper, more sustained learning (Gulikers et al., 2004). Research by Wiewiora and Kowalkiewicz (2019) indicates that authentic assessment improves problem-solving and leadership skills by engaging students in tasks that replicate real-world challenges. Similar findings were reported by Akbari et al. (2022), who demonstrated that performative tasks and reflective portfolios can strengthen students' collaborative competencies and decision-making capacities. Furthermore, peer assessment has been shown to improve the accuracy of self-monitoring and the effectiveness of teamwork, which are essential components of student leadership (Kearney et al., 2016). Thus, the combination of assessment methods implemented by the three schools is a technical choice and is consistent with the evidence that multi-source assessment is the most effective strategy for promoting comprehensive leadership development.

The strengths of each program, namely creativity and agency, empathy and social responsibility, and discipline and morality, emphasize that leadership programs can be directed toward different character outcomes according to the school's educational priorities. According to Antopolskaya et al. (2021), fostering personal agency and leadership skills can be achieved through leadership programs that support student creativity. However, this emphasizes the need for clear curricular objectives and cross-program integration to ensure that desired outcomes do not conflict. Research by Dabdoub et al. (2024) emphasizes that achieving a strong, successful program requires practical alignment with the internalization of values through structured practices and school culture. A similar point is emphasized by Salsabilah et al. (2025). Thus, the main challenge lies in each school's ability to strike a balance between student empowerment and value instillation so that the various program strengths do not conflict but contribute to holistic character formation.

Identified obstacles such as inconsistent student participation, varying mentor capacity, and the challenge of balancing discipline with creativity underscore the need for robust program management, such as through the selection and training of mentors, mechanisms for motivating ongoing participation, and flexibility in activity design to provide space for creativity without sacrificing disciplinary values. According to Agirdag and Muijs (2023), implementing an effective leadership program requires organizational support, ongoing training for program mentors, and monitoring of its implementation. The effectiveness of a leadership program is influenced by organizational support, such as management commitment (Åhlfeldt et al., 2023), leadership involvement (Proctor et al., 2019), and stakeholder involvement (Jayashree et al., 2022; Szwajczewski et al., 2024). Furthermore, ongoing mentor training, such as continuous capacity

building (Proctor et al., 2019; Asampong et al., 2023; Huang et al., 2025) and mentoring programs (Asampong et al., 2023), is also a factor in the effectiveness of leadership programs. Therefore, monitoring and evaluation of leadership programs, such as regular monitoring (Owen & Wong, 2021) and feedback mechanisms (Rasheed et al., 2022), are integral parts of leadership programs.

The practical implications of this study are the recommendations for an integrated model for student leadership development: (a) formulating explicit program objectives, for example, by integrating agency and moral values; (b) providing diverse, complementary formal and informal activity pathways; (c) implementing multi-source formative assessment; and (d) strengthening the capacity of mentors and implementation management to address participation and sustainability issues. Such a model facilitates the development of leadership skills, can shape a cohesive school culture, and support the long-term character development of Islamic school students.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that students' leadership traits in Indonesian Islamic middle schools emerge as contextually shaped behaviors rather than fixed attributes, influenced by school culture, religious values, teacher modeling, and opportunities for agency. The contextual mapping conducted in this research reveals three dominant traits: responsibility, social initiative, and morally grounded influence that consistently appear across settings, though expressed differently according to situational demands. These findings contribute to theory by strengthening an ecological understanding of adolescent leadership and highlighting the unique role of faith-based identity formation in leadership enactment within Islamic schooling. In practice, the results provide a strong empirical basis for developing character and leadership programs that are culturally relevant, developmentally appropriate, and integrated into students' everyday experiences. Despite its strengths, the study is limited to selected Islamic schools and to qualitative data, suggesting the need for broader, mixed-methods research. Future studies should expand the context, include diverse school types, and explore longitudinal patterns to build a more comprehensive framework for leadership-driven character development in Indonesia.

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