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Character Education Management in Public Elementary Schools (A Multi-Site Study at SDN Kuin Cerucuk 1 and SDN Kuin Cerucuk 3)

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the management of character education in public elementary schools through the aspects of principal leadership, school culture, and quality assurance. The research employed a qualitative approach with a multisite study design conducted at SDN Kuin Cerucuk 1 and SDN Kuin Cerucuk 3 Banjarmasin, Indonesia. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation involving principals, teachers, and students. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, including data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing, and cross-site analysis. The validity of the data was ensured through triangulation, member checking, prolonged engagement, and audit trails. The findings revealed that character education management in both schools was implemented through the synergy of principal leadership, school culture, and sustainable quality assurance. Principals played strategic roles in formulating policies, directing programs, supervising implementation, and encouraging the involvement of teachers, parents, and the community in character education activities. School culture was developed through routine habituation, role modeling, religious activities, environmental awareness programs, and the integration of local cultural values into daily school life. Furthermore, quality assurance was carried out through continuous monitoring, periodic evaluation, documentation, and reflective discussions involving school stakeholders. Although the schools still faced limitations in standardized character assessment instruments, strong commitment and collaboration among school members supported the sustainability of character education programs. The study concludes that effective character education management is strongly influenced by visionary principal leadership, consistent school culture, and sustainable quality assurance systems.

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A. INTRODUCTION

Character education has become a strategic issue in educational development amidst the era of globalization and rapid technological advancement. Dynamic social changes in the digital era not only influence individual mindsets and behaviors but also contribute to the erosion of moral values, ethics, and social responsibility within society. Various nations recognize that education must not solely focus on intellectual development; it must also be capable of shaping individuals with integrity, empathy, and social responsibility. The United Nations (UN), through its sustainable development agenda, emphasizes the importance of quality education that supports the creation of inclusive, just, and sustainable societies. In this context, character education constitutes an essential component of efforts to enhance the quality of education (Indriasari *et al.,* 2024).

Character education serves as a strategic foundation in developing human resources that possess integrity, strong character, and competitiveness. It functions to sustainably instill moral values, responsibility, and a work ethic in students (Setyowati & Suriansyah, 2025). Furthermore, the implementation of character education emphasizes the integration of knowledge, attitude, and skill aspects through synergy among schools, families, and communities (Zumaini, Suriansyah & Suhaimi, 2026). Nevertheless, the implementation of character education across various countries presents diverse challenges. Developing nations, including Indonesia, still face various obstacles, such as limited resources, policy inconsistencies, and a lack of comprehensive understanding among educators regarding character education concepts (Muttaqin et al., 2025). This situation is further exacerbated by the rise of bullying behavior, weak student discipline, and global influences that do not always align with the nation's noble values.

Within the context of national education, character education at the elementary school level holds a crucial position, as this phase represents a strategic period for shaping children's morals and personalities. Elementary school students are at a stage of moral development that is profoundly influenced by their environment and consistent habituation (Rahmah, Suriansyah & Harsono, 2026). Primary education also serves as a transitional phase in moral development, shifting from compliance with external rules toward self-derived moral awareness (Rahmah, Suriansyah & Cinantya, 2024). Consequently, character education at the elementary school level requires not only conceptual learning but also systematic management through school culture, habituation, and leadership that supports the sustainable internalization of character values.

Principal leadership is a crucial factor in the successful implementation of character education. Yuridka & Aslamiah (2025) add that principals hold a strategic role in managing, directing, and developing character education through policies, school culture, and the strengthening of learning programs. In implementing the Strengthening of Character Education (PPK), as regulated by Presidential Regulation Number 87 of 2017, principals are required to ensure that the educational process focuses not only on academic aspects but also on shaping students' attitudes and behaviors that reflect character values. The principal's role in integrating cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains into learning is key to the success of character education in schools (Riduansyah, Aslamiah & Saleh, 2026). Furthermore, principals need to facilitate the development of teacher competencies to ensure they possess an adequate understanding of implementing character education effectively (Ranisa et al., 2025).

In addition to principal leadership, school culture also plays a vital role in supporting the success of character education. A conducive school culture creates consistent moral experiences through habituation, role modeling, and social interactions that occur in daily school life (Yuliani et al., 2026). A consistently built school culture reinforces the internalization process of character values, ensuring that students not only understand these values conceptually but are also capable of implementing them in real behavior (Hartini et al., 2025). Suriansyah (2015) adds that this habituation process serves as an effective means of shaping students' moral awareness, as it is carried out continuously and in a planned manner. Consequently, elementary school culture needs to be systematically designed to create a learning environment that supports students' character development.

On the other hand, quality assurance in character education remains a challenge in the management of elementary education. Character education evaluation is generally still conducted informally and is not yet supported by structured indicators or assessment instruments. This condition poses difficulties for schools in measuring the extent to which

character values have been internalized into students' behavior. Quality assurance for character education requires a clear, measurable evaluation system based on character indicators that can be observed in students' behavior (Nuryani, 2024). Such evaluation can be carried out through observation, reflection, and documentation of students' daily activities within the school environment (Perdana, Suriansyah & Harsono, 2025). Therefore, evaluation results must be followed up with program improvements, capacity building for educators, and the development of character education implementation strategies to ensure its sustainability (Suriansyah & Purwanti, 2025).

Issues in character education at the elementary school level lie not only in its implementation but also in its managerial aspects as a holistic system. Character education is frequently perceived merely as a set of habituation activities and has not been managed through an integrated process of planning, implementation, evaluation, and follow-up. The interconnection among principal leadership, school culture, and the quality assurance system does not always function harmoniously, thereby creating a gap between planned values and actual practices within schools. Furthermore, studies on character education management that comprehensively integrate these three aspects remain relatively limited, particularly within the context of public elementary schools.

Previous studies have generally examined these three dimensions of character education management in isolation. Research by Yuridka and Aslamiah (2025) and Riduansyah, Aslamiah, and Saleh (2026) has concentrated primarily on the role of principal leadership, while studies by Yuliani et al. (2026) and Hartini, Suriansyah, and Purwanti (2025) have focused on the formation of school culture through habituation and role modeling. Other works, such as Nuryani (2024) and Suriansyah and Purwanti (2025), have addressed quality assurance and evaluation systems as separate concerns. Few studies, however, have examined how principal leadership, school culture, and quality assurance interact and reinforce one another within a single management system, particularly through a comparative multi-site design. This study positions itself within this gap by offering an integrative and comparative perspective, examining how the three dimensions operate together across two public elementary schools with contrasting management characteristics.

Based on preliminary observations in several public elementary schools in Banjarmasin, it is evident that character education has been managed through principal leadership, school culture, and quality assurance systems implemented in their respective educational units. This implementation is carried out through the schools' vision and mission, work programs, and routine habituation in daily activities. Nevertheless, a number of challenges remain in maintaining the consistency of implementation and the sustainable internalization of character values.

This study focuses on character education management at SDN Kuin Cerucuk 1 and SDN Kuin Cerucuk 3 in Banjarmasin City through a multi-site study approach. The selection of these two schools was based on positive developments in managing school culture and shaping students' character. Both schools exhibit excellent student discipline, positive social interactions, and a consistent application of character values across school activities. Furthermore, both institutions have garnered high public trust and demonstrated various academic and non-academic achievements. SDN Kuin Cerucuk 1 is recognized for its environmental-care-based programs, clean and healthy living behaviors, and its success in achieving the provincial-level Adiwiyata (eco-school) status and the national-level healthy school title. Meanwhile, SDN Kuin Cerucuk 3 demonstrates systematic character education management through the documentation of student

behavioral development, activity evaluations, and the utilization of data as a basis for reflecting on school programs.

The distinct characteristics of the two schools reflect variations in character education management practices within public elementary schools. These variations indicate that a standardized yet contextual character education management model has not yet been established, particularly one capable of harmoniously and sustainably integrating principal leadership, school culture, and quality assurance systems. Therefore, this study is crucial to provide theoretical contributions to the advancement of educational management science, specifically regarding character education management at the elementary school level. Furthermore, this research is expected to yield a multi-site study-based conceptual model of character education management that can serve as a reference for enhancing character education in elementary schools.

B. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a multi-site study design to gain an in-depth understanding of character education management practices in public elementary schools. The qualitative approach was selected because this study focuses on understanding phenomena in a holistic, contextual, and natural manner, rather than testing hypotheses or statistical relationships between variables. According to Sugiyono (2023), qualitative research is grounded in a post-positivistic paradigm that positions the researcher as the primary instrument to deeply explore meaning and social realities through observation, interviews, and documentation. A multi-site study design is utilized because character education management practices are influenced by the distinct contexts of leadership, school culture, and quality assurance systems at each school. The research was conducted at SDN Kuin Cerucuk 1 and SDN Kuin Cerucuk 3 Banjarmasin, serving as two research sites with distinct characteristics in character education management. This multi-site study approach enables the researcher to understand the unique characteristics of each school while simultaneously identifying general patterns in character education management (Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Hoon, 2013).

The researcher serves as the primary instrument, being directly present in the field to conduct data collection through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation studies. The researcher's presence is participatory yet non-interventive, while strictly adhering to research ethics and establishing good rapport with the informants. According to Sugiyono (2023), the researcher in qualitative research holds a central role because no other instrument can substitute for the researcher's sensitivity and interpretative capacity in understanding social phenomena. Research informants were selected purposively, comprising the school principal as the key informant, classroom and subject teachers, as well as students. Secondary data were obtained from official school documents, such as the school's vision and mission statements, character education programs, instructional materials, activity reports, and quality assurance evaluation archives for character education.

Data collection techniques were carried out in an integrated manner through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation studies. Semi-structured interviews were employed to explore information regarding the planning, implementation, and evaluation of character education. Observations were conducted using both participant and non-participant approaches to examine character habituation activities, instructional processes, social interactions, and daily school culture. Meanwhile, documentation studies were utilized to corroborate and verify the data obtained from interviews and observations. Data analysis utilized the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and

Saldaña (2014), which comprises data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data reduction involved selecting, simplifying, and focusing on relevant field data concerning principal leadership, school culture, and quality assurance obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation. Data display was carried out by organizing the reduced data into narrative summaries and matrices for each research site to reveal emerging patterns and relationships among the three focus areas. Conclusion drawing and verification involved formulating tentative interpretations of these patterns, which were continuously verified against the field data through triangulation, member checking, and repeated confirmation with informants until stable and credible conclusions were obtained. The analysis was performed in two stages: within-site analysis to understand the unique characteristics of each school, and cross-site analysis to identify similarities, differences, and patterns of character education management across both schools. In the cross-site analysis, findings from both schools were systematically compared and contrasted to identify convergent and divergent management practices, which were then synthesized into overarching patterns of character education management in public elementary schools.

Data trustworthiness in this study is maintained through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability criteria. Data credibility is established through source, technique, and time triangulation, member checking, and the researcher's prolonged engagement in the field. Transferability is achieved by providing a detailed and contextual description of the research so that the findings can be understood and applied to similar contexts. Dependability is maintained through the systematic documentation of the research process and an audit trail, whereas confirmability is ensured by linking each research finding to empirical evidence consisting of interview, observation, and documentation results. Through these procedures, this study is expected to generate valid and profound findings that contribute both theoretically and practically to the advancement of character education management in public elementary schools.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study were obtained through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation studies at SDN Kuin Cerucuk 1 and SDN Kuin Cerucuk 3 Banjarmasin. These findings were analyzed based on the research focus, which encompasses principal leadership, school culture, and quality assurance in character education management. Furthermore, the results are discussed by linking them to relevant theories and prior research to gain a comprehensive understanding of character education management practices in public elementary schools.

Table 1. Principal Leadership in Character Education Management

Aspect	SDN Kuin Cerucuk 1	SDN Kuin Cerucuk 3	Research Findings
Principal's Role	Establishing character programs in a structured and systematic manner	Developing collaborative approaches with parents and the community	The principal plays an active role as a director, driver, and supervisor of character education
Leadership Strategy	Policy-oriented and routine habituation-oriented	Cooperation-oriented and school community participation-oriented	Adaptive and visionary leadership supports the success of character education
Program Supervision	Routine evaluation and teacher coordination	Student behavior monitoring and joint reflection	Supervision is conducted periodically to maintain program consistency

Stakeholder Engagement	Involving teachers in program implementation	Active involvement of parents and the community	Synergy among the school, family, and community reinforces character education

The findings of this study indicate that principal leadership in both schools plays a strategic role in character education management. Principals act not only as administrators but also as leaders of change who actively direct and build a value-based school culture. This finding aligns with Ramadhani et al. (2025), who argue that the success of character education is determined by leadership capable of integrating knowledge, attitude, and skill domains through synergy among schools, families, and communities. At SDN Kuin Cerucuk 1, leadership places greater emphasis on a structural and systematic approach, whereas SDN Kuin Cerucuk 3 highlights a collaborative approach through the involvement of parents and the community. Both approaches have proven effective in creating a school climate conducive to students' character development.

The results of this study also concur with research by Kenneth Leithwood and Doris Jantzi (2005), which asserts that transformational principal leadership exerts a significant influence on the formation of a positive school culture and student character development. Furthermore, research by Philip Hallinger (2011) demonstrates that instructional principal leadership is capable of creating a conducive learning environment, enhancing school community collaboration, and strengthening the implementation of character values in daily school life.

Table 2. School Culture in Character Education Management

Aspect	SDN Kuin Cerucuk 1	SDN Kuin Cerucuk 3	Research Findings
Character Habituation	*Murajaah* (Quranic review), gymnastics, *gotong royong* (communal cooperation), Banjar language culture	*Murajaah* (Quranic review), gymnastics, short storytelling, parental involvement	Routine habituation forms the core of character-based school culture
Role Modeling	The principal and teachers serve as role models	Teachers and the school community are actively involved	Role modeling reinforces the internalization of character values
Values Developed	Religiosity, discipline, environmental care	Responsibility, social awareness, local culture	Character values are integrated into daily activities
Impact of School Culture	Enhanced discipline and awareness	Improved responsibility and social interaction	School culture significantly influences students' behavior

School culture in both schools is established through routine habituation, role modeling, and the active involvement of the entire school community. Character values are not only taught conceptually but are lived out through students' direct experiences in daily life. This finding reinforces the view of Suriansyah and Aslamiah (2020) that school culture plays a vital role in shaping moral awareness through continuous habituation and social interaction. The habituation programs implemented in both schools have proven capable of enhancing students' discipline, responsibility, and social awareness. Furthermore, the success of both schools as provincial-level Adiwiyata (eco-schools)

demonstrates that a consistent school culture is capable of supporting sustainable student character development (Noviani, Suriansyah & Sulistiyana, 2025).

This finding is also supported by research by Terence Deal and Kent Peterson (2016), which states that a positive school culture is capable of shaping students' behaviors, values, and habits through school traditions, teacher role modeling, and sustainable social interaction. Moreover, research by Maurice J. Elias (2019) asserts that a socially and emotionally supportive school environment contributes significantly to students' character development, social responsibility, and prosocial behavior. Consequently, a consistently built school culture becomes a crucial factor in the successful implementation of character education in elementary schools.

Table 3. Quality Assurance in Character Education

Aspect	SDN Kuin Cerucuk 1	SDN Kuin Cerucuk 3	Research Findings
Program Monitoring	Observing student behavior and achievements	Documenting student behavioral development	Monitoring is conducted continuously
Program Evaluation	Joint reflection with teachers	Utilizing data as a basis for evaluation	Evaluation is performed for program improvement
Parental Involvement	Communicating student progress	Involving parents in evaluations	Synergy between the school and family supports value internalization
Challenges	Absence of standardized instruments	Uneven understanding of character indicators among educators	Quality assurance still faces limitations in assessment instruments

Quality assurance in character education at both schools is carried out through periodic monitoring, evaluation, documentation, and reflection. The principal, along with the teachers, actively monitor the development of students' behavior to ensure that character values are thoroughly internalized in daily life. This finding aligns with Suriansyah (2022), who posits that quality assurance in character education requires a clear, measurable evaluation system based on student behavioral indicators. Although both schools still face limitations regarding standardized character assessment instruments, the commitment of the entire school community and parental involvement sustain the continuous implementation of character education. Furthermore, the observation-, reflection-, and documentation-based evaluations conducted by both schools correspond to the views of Suriansyah and Aslamiah (2021) regarding the importance of comprehensive evaluation in character education quality assurance within elementary schools.

This finding is further reinforced by Thomas R. Guskey (2000), who asserts that the success of educational programs is profoundly influenced by a continuous evaluation system carried out systematically through monitoring, reflection, and follow-up. Moreover, research by Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan (2012) demonstrates that a collaborative and reflective evaluation culture in schools can enhance the quality of educational program implementation, including character education, as it involves the active participation of teachers, principals, and parents in the process of continuous improvement. Consequently, quality assurance in character education requires not only sound evaluation instruments but also a collective commitment from the entire school community to cultivate a culture of reflection and continuous improvement.

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The findings of this study indicate that character education management at SDN Kuin Cerucuk 1 and SDN Kuin Cerucuk 3 Banjarmasin is implemented through a sustainable synergy among principal leadership, school culture, and quality assurance. Principals play an active role in formulating policies, directing programs, and fostering the involvement of the school community, parents, and the wider community in implementing character education. School culture is developed through routine habituation, role modeling, and various activities that support the internalization of character values in students' daily lives. Quality assurance for character education is carried out through continuous monitoring, periodic evaluation, and activity documentation. Despite the remaining limitations in standardized character assessment instruments, the commitment of the entire school community successfully maintains the consistency of character education implementation. Consequently, the success of character education management is profoundly driven by visionary principal leadership, a consistent school culture, and a sustainable quality assurance system.

Based on these research findings, schools are recommended to strengthen character education management through consistent habituation, periodic evaluation, and the development of more standardized and systematically documented character assessment instruments. Principals are expected to continuously cultivate open, collaborative, and inspiring leadership by integrating character values and local wisdom across all school programs. Furthermore, the Education Office and local governments need to provide mentorship, training, and school networking facilitation to support the sustainable strengthening of character education. Future researchers are also advised to examine the long-term impacts of character education management across diverse school contexts to generate a more comprehensive and contextual management model.

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