

Experiential Learning in the School of Leadership Model: Shaping Students' Perceptions and Engagement

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the implementation strategy of the *School of Leadership* program and the internalization of leadership values among students at SMA IT Daarul Istiqlal. Student leadership is often reduced to formal organizational activities, thereby necessitating an in-depth examination of how leadership is developed through integrative learning experiences. This research employed a case study design with a qualitative-descriptive approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the principal, teachers, and students, as well as through in-depth observations. Data analysis was conducted systematically through the stages of data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that the internalization of leadership values was carried out through three main pillars: integration into classroom learning activities through the *experiential learning* method, reinforcement through extracurricular activities, and the provision of dialogical spaces through school community communication forums (*FKGM* and *FKWS*). A strong organizational culture emerged as the primary supporting factor that transformed students' motivation from external pressure into intrinsic needs. Despite challenges related to academic time management, the program successfully transformed students' perceptions into those of change agents characterized by independence, empathy, and social responsibility. This study implies the importance of creating a dialogical school ecosystem to foster transformational leadership in a sustainable manner.

Keywords: *School of Leadership; Student; Organizational Culture.*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis strategi implementasi program *School of Leadership* dan internalisasi nilai-nilai kepemimpinan siswa di SMA IT Daarul Istiqlal. Fenomena kepemimpinan siswa sering kali direduksi menjadi aktivitas organisasi formal, sehingga diperlukan kajian mendalam mengenai bagaimana kepemimpinan dibentuk melalui pengalaman belajar yang integratif. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain studi kasus dengan pendekatan kualitatif-deskriptif. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan kepala sekolah, guru, dan siswa, dan observasi mendalam. Analisis data dilakukan secara sistematis melalui tahap kondensasi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa internalisasi kepemimpinan dilakukan melalui tiga pilar utama: integrasi dalam Kegiatan Belajar Mengajar (KBM) melalui metode *experiential learning*, penguatan melalui kegiatan ekstrakurikuler, serta penyediaan ruang dialektika melalui forum komunikasi warga sekolah (*FKGM* dan *FKWS*). Budaya organisasi yang kuat menjadi faktor pendukung utama yang mengubah motivasi siswa dari

tekanan eksternal menjadi kebutuhan intrinsik. Meskipun dihadapkan pada tantangan manajemen waktu akademik, program ini berhasil mentransformasi persepsi siswa menjadi agen perubahan yang memiliki kemandirian, empati, dan tanggung jawab sosial. Penelitian ini berimplikasi pada pentingnya menciptakan ekosistem sekolah yang dialogis untuk menumbuhkan jiwa kepemimpinan transformasional secara berkelanjutan.

Kata Kunci: *Sekolah Kepemimpinan; Siswa; Budaya Organisasi.*

Introduction

Efforts to position students as agents of change cannot be reduced to mere one-way knowledge transfer practices. Social and intellectual change requires reflective capacity, critical awareness, and courage to act that cannot be accommodated through information accumulation alone. In contemporary educational discourse, students are no longer passive objects, but autonomous subjects who are able to construct meaning, evaluate reality, and initiate strategic roles in their environment. Learning that is stalled in the cognitive dimension will only result in retention skills, not leadership competencies. Therefore, a pedagogical approach is needed that integrates experience, reflection, and action, so that students are able to internalize leadership values as the basis of self-awareness (Leupold et al., 2020).

Within this framework, leadership development becomes a strategic element that not only strengthens organizational capacity, but also fundamentally transforms students' mindsets and action patterns. Leadership at the student level integrates the value of responsibility, risk-based decision-making, social empathy, and constructive influence on the environment. These values inherently form a proactive mindset and visionary action orientation, not just a reactive response to a situation. Thus, leadership must be understood beyond formal attributes in the organizational structure of the school; it is a process of character formation and existential awareness that underlies the role of students in the academic and social realms (Balwant et al., 2020).

Leadership in an educational context is integral to active learning experiences. Referring to *the Experiential Learning* theory from (Balwant, 2022), meaningful knowledge is the result of a dialectic between concrete experience and critical reflection. In this context, leadership experience is actualized through involvement in organizations, cross-role collaboration, and conflict resolution over real problems in schools. This process not only transfers *soft skills*, but also forms the identity of leadership as a *living practice*. Consequently, leadership becomes an integral part of the

curriculum of school life, not just an extracurricular activity that is separate from the instructional process.

An exploration of the literature shows that leadership contributes significantly to improving the quality of learning and engagement (Fisher, 2023). Research (Balwant et al., 2020) confirms that student leadership through developmental experiences that train self-efficacy and personal capacity. Furthermore, (Balwant, 2022) shows that *experiential learning* plays an important role in increasing motivation and learning engagement. (Torrico et al., 2025) found that experiential leadership education can shape students' leadership identities. This research focuses on bridging the discrepancy between the dimensions of learning experience and the construction of student leadership comprehensively.

Based on these arguments, this study aims to analyze in depth the implementation of *experiential learning* in the framework of transformational leadership in the school environment, as well as its influence on the formation of student perception and engagement. The research focus is directed at two main issues: the design of student leadership development programs and student engagement strategies to produce meaningful learning experiences. Through this analysis, the research is expected to be able to reveal that leadership learning experiences not only build conceptual understanding, but also internalize leadership values that are justified through active involvement and awareness of students' roles as catalysts of change in educational institutions.

Method

This research uses a case study design at SMA IT Daarul Istiqlal Deli Serdang, which functions as a social-pedagogical space in the development of student leadership programs. The selection of this approach is based on the ontology that the phenomenon of leadership cannot be reduced to a positivistic measurable variable, but must be understood as an experiential construct that is contextual, interactive, and full of meaning. Data collection techniques are accommodated through semi-structured interviews, an instrument that provides exploratory flexibility without losing the theoretical focus of the research. Key informants involve triangulation of subjects: students as the main actors of the learning experience, principals as policy makers, and teachers as pedagogical facilitators. The focus of data mining is directed at the dialectic between program design, internalization of experiences, and subjective meanings of students in the school ecosystem. Data analysis is carried out systematically which includes the stages of data

condensation, data presentation, and conclusions/verification. The process of analyzing conceptual efforts to filter information, organize meaningful patterns, and build argumentative interpretations. Thus, this analysis is able to reveal how the structure of the learning experience contributes profoundly to the construction of perceptions and the escalation of students' active engagement.

Results and Discussion

Model school of leadership policy of SMA IT Daarul Istiqlal Deli Serdang

The School of Leadership policy at SMA IT Daarul Istiqlal Deli Serdang does not exist as an entirely new construction, but rather as a conceptual articulation of leadership practices that have long lived in the school culture. Empirically, the implementation of this policy is internalized in various student activities without going through a formal and separate program design. This condition shows that schools position leadership as an inherent value in the educational process, not as additional material that is taught in a structured manner (Mincu, 2022). In terms of experience, teachers and students did not feel any significant changes after the formalization of the concept, because leadership practices have become part of their daily lives. As such, these policies serve more as a conceptual legitimacy for an established practice than as an entirely new innovation.

The response of school residents to the *School of Leadership's* policies reflects the dynamics of a stable and non-reactive organization, which indicates a profound convergence between formal regulation and established institutional culture. Teachers and students tend to adopt this policy as part of a functional routine, where roles and responsibilities are carried out without resistance or disruptive euphoria. This phenomenon reinforces the argument that leadership values have been internalized as a habitus of a system of disposition that is ingrained in the school ecosystem. In this context, *the School of Leadership's* policy does not exist as an intervention that radically changes the substance of practice, but rather serves as a symbolic formality that emphasizes the direction of character development that has been running organically.

Managerially, the formulation of this policy cannot be separated from the influence of external determinants, especially the demands of the implementation of School-Based Management (SBM) which demands more explicit and accountable institutional governance. The school management views that the formalization of the leadership concept is a strategic urgency to align the expectations of the modern education system with the school's local identity. Instead of taking the path of drastic

structural transformation, schools choose a strategy of internalizing narratives through strengthening doctrines and discourses that are delivered consistently in various articulation forums (Rofiqi et al., 2026). This process ensures that leadership policies do not just stop as administrative documents, but continue to transform into a collective consciousness that strengthens the pedagogical identity of SMA IT Daarul Istiqla.

Implementasi operasional *School of Leadership* di SMA IT Daarul Istiqlal diwujudkan melalui skema integrasi kurikulum yang holistik, yang menyatukan dimensi akademik, ekstrakurikuler, dan momentum organisatoris secara koheren. Hal ini didasarkan pada filosofi bahwa kepemimpinan bukanlah entitas instruksional yang terisolasi, melainkan kompetensi transdisipliner yang harus meresap ke dalam seluruh ekosistem pembelajaran. Pola integrasi ini selaras dengan prinsip manajemen mutu terpadu dalam pendidikan, di mana setiap aktivitas—sekecil apa pun—difungsikan sebagai laboratorium sosial untuk membentuk kapasitas manajerial dan etika siswa.

In contrast to conventional models that often reduce leadership to specialized subjects or formal training that is temporary, this integrative approach offers a more stable and in-depth sustainability of the process. As a result, the school succeeds in creating an environment where leadership values become part of the daily pulse, ensuring that the internalization of character occurs simultaneously with the process of acquiring academic knowledge.

Through active involvement in various independent agendas, leadership transforms from a mere theoretical construction to a practice that lives in the midst of students' daily lives. Direct participation in activity management allows for a process of reflection on actions that are crucial for the formation of a young leader's identity. Referring to an experiential learning perspective, the most authentic leadership knowledge is born when students are faced with real challenges, decision-making under pressure, as well as conflict resolution in group dynamics (Schreck et al., 2020). If the conventional approach tends to only touch the cognitive or memorization realms, then this experiential approach touches the affective and psychomotor realms in a balanced manner. Thus, this strategy not only aims to produce students who are organizationally capable, but also to form agents of change who have a deep sense of role and mental readiness to respond to social realities in the future.

Schools implicitly apply the principle of experiential learning, where experience becomes the main medium in shaping students' understanding and leadership attitudes (Miao & Nduneseokwu, 2024). The integration of leadership in various activities allows students to not only

understand concepts, but also test and reflect on their role in a real-world context. This reinforces the argument that effective leadership is not formed through formal instruction alone, but rather through repeated and meaningful engagement. In this context, the School of Leadership's policies serve as a framework that directs the experience to have a clear value orientation. Therefore, the implementation of this policy not only results in leadership skills, but also shapes students' perceptions of the meaning and role of leadership in their lives.

Leadership in School Program

The internalization of leadership values at SMA IT Daarul Istiqlal is not constructed as an isolated discipline in one specific subject, but is organically integrated into all teaching and learning activities in the classroom. This pedagogical choice is based on the understanding that leadership is a behavioral competency that can only grow through habituation, not just the transfer of cognitive information in the classroom. Theoretically, this pattern reflects the concept of a *hidden curriculum*, in which character values are channeled through the structure of daily interaction between teachers and students. Compared to schools that separate character education in special hours, this integrative model is much more effective in guaranteeing the sustainability of the process of internalizing values. The target is for each classroom to be transformed into a leadership laboratory where each academic instruction contains a character development dimension (Leithwood et al., 2020).

1. Leadership Through Learning

The internalization of leadership at SMA IT Daarul Istiqlal is articulated organically through the integration of values into Teaching and Learning Activities (KBM), which positions the classroom as a stage for the actualization of social skills. The rationality of this approach lies in creating a relevance between mastery of academic material and real leadership competencies, where interactive dialogue and question and answer serve as a medium for students to observe and replicate the teacher's leadership model. Fundamentally, this strategy is different from conventional training which often loses its applicative context, since in this institution, every instructional moment is utilized as a vital means to build intellectual authority and student confidence in a controlled but dynamic environment.

Group presentation activities and class discussion coordination are concrete instruments for students to practice persuasive influence through logical argumentation. Within the framework of transformational leadership, this moment is not just the fulfillment of academic tasks, but

rather a stage to communicate the vision and guide the audience towards a common goal. This active presentation practice provides autonomy for students to take control of learning, which significantly increases initiative and the courage to speak up. Compared to the passive lecture method, this pattern ensures students are accustomed to taking on the role of a leader who is able to convince others with a strong communication ethic.

The process of working on group assignments is constructed as a dialectical space that trains students' emotional maturity through the practice of receiving criticism reflectively. The classroom functions as a social microcosm that forces students to deal with differences of opinion without triggering destructive conflicts, thus honing conflict resolution skills that are superior to individualistic learning systems. This dialectic shapes the character of future leaders who are not only vocal and proactive, but also have the intellectual humility to continue learning from multiple perspectives. The long-term goal is the birth of a person who is able to balance the firmness of the argument with an open-minded attitude to collective input.

The implementation of horizontal leadership in the classroom emphasizes collaboration and positive influence through a process of *trial and error* in peer interaction. Students learn that true leadership is not hierarchical, but rather based on fair division of duties, collective responsibility, and empathy for group members. The experience of leading peers provides in-depth insights into the importance of finding solutions to academic challenges together. By prioritizing ethical influence over formal authority, schools shape the character of students who are able to move their social environment persuasively and constructively.

Teachers play a central role as experiential designers or catalysts who transform academic instruction into transformative pedagogy rich in character values. Going beyond the traditional boundaries of *knowledge transfer*, teachers deliberately insert dimensions of discipline, time management, and personal integrity into each assignment. Teachers understand that technical prowess without a foundation of emotional intelligence will not have the maximum impact in real leadership. This strategy creates a transitional space where academic knowledge and life values merge, preparing students to face real-world complexities with commitment and solid self-management.

Strengthening the aspect of empathy and sympathy in group dynamics is the main differentiator of the humanist leadership model at SMA IT Daarul Istiqlal. The leadership culture that is built is supportive, where individual success is seen as a representation of collective success, thus

distancing students from destructive competitive behavior. Leaders born from the womb of education are expected not only to pursue targets and achievements, but always humanize humans in every decision-making process. Through the consistency of this value integration, the school has succeeded in proving that leadership is a manifestation of strong character, social concern, and responsibility that is brought to life in daily life.

2. Leadership Through Extracurricular

Extracurricular activities at SMA IT Daarul Istiqlal are positioned as field leadership laboratories that complement the internalization of values that have begun in the classroom. Strategically, the school establishes Scouting and Paskibraka as mandatory instruments for students to actualize their leadership potential in a more organized structure. The theoretical foundation of this policy is character development through scouting education which inherently contains the principles of independence and collective responsibility (Buckley & Lee, 2021). When compared to curricular activities that are limited to the physical space of the classroom, extracurriculars offer a more dynamic ecosystem for students to practice physical and mental agility. The main goal is to create a synchronization between a theoretical understanding of leadership with real, measurable field practice.

The rationale behind the obligation to participate in Scouting for all grade levels is rooted in the need to build sustainable leadership regeneration in the school environment. Although operationally the focus of coaching is now more intensive on first-graders as the basis for initial formation, the essence of leadership remains permeated at every level through a tiered system. This phenomenon is supported by the fact that Scouting always contains a leadership dimension because each activity almost always involves squad cooperation that demands a clear division of roles. This approach is fundamentally different from the usual talent interest activities that may focus solely on technical expertise. Thus, the school ensures that each student has a basic foundation in managing the group before they plunge into the wider society.

In the dynamics of a squad group, students are consistently faced with situations that require the ability to make quick and precise decisions. This process is a manifestation of *problem-based learning* where each challenge in a field activity becomes a medium for students to test their logical acuity and emotional calmness. Based on the results of the interview with the Vice Principal for Student Affairs, decision-making in the squad is not just a technical activity, but an exercise for students to consider various consequences for the common good. When compared

to individual decision-making, the decision-making model in a squad demands more complex consensus and coordination. This is so that students are accustomed to taking responsibility for every choice taken in their leadership.

Extracurricular activities such as Paskibraka and Pramuka function as the main medium in training high-level discipline combined with family values. This positive contradiction between disciplined firmness and the warmth of a sense of kinship creates a unique leadership identity, where firmness does not mean neglecting the human aspect. In the framework of *servant leadership*, a leader must be able to discipline himself before demanding the same from others, but still maintain an emotional bond with his members. A striking difference is seen in the more solid and highly loyal interaction patterns between members compared to organizations that rely solely on formal instruction. The long-term goal is the formation of a mentally strong leader character but still has great empathy (Feraco et al., 2023).

Complexity in extracurricular activities arises when students have to solve various problems through an inclusive deliberation mechanism. Discussion rooms in the field are often more challenging than in the classroom because the problems at hand are practical and require immediate solutions. This deliberation practice is concrete evidence of the implementation of democratic values and collective-collegial leadership taught by the school. Compared to authoritarian decision-making, the deliberation process trains students to respect differences of opinion and find common ground amid a diversity of ideas. This approach offers valuable experience on how to manage conflict constructively to achieve organizational goals (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021).

3. Leadership Through Communication Forums

Student leadership at SMA IT Daarul Istiqlal is strategically grown through strengthening a dialogue culture in the Student Teacher Communication Forum (FKGM) and School Citizen Communication Forum (FKWS) programs. The placement of students as initiators as well as active participants in this forum is based on the principle that authentic leadership is born from the ability to communicate and negotiate in public spaces. Through a routine agenda every semester in the school hall, students not only learn to manage events, but also learn to position themselves as a bridge of communication between school elements. Compared to schools that implement *top-down* policies with no room for aspiration, this forum model offers a more democratic and inclusive leadership structure. The target is to form the character of a leader who

has rhetorical skills and moral courage to voice the aspirations of his constituents.

The implementation of FKGM which involves two sessions of deliberation is to train critical thinking acumen and issue management for MPK administrators. The first session in the form of a *talk show* with the theme of student choice, such as teacher and student appreciation, serves as a medium to build a positive narrative and understanding of values. This provides evidence that student leadership in this institution has reached a strategic level, where they are able to determine a public agenda (*agenda setting*) that is relevant to the school community. This approach is fundamentally different from the student leadership pattern which is only administrative, because here students are trained to be drafters who are able to direct public opinion towards improving the quality of inter-personal relationships in schools.

FKGM, which provides free space to provide criticism and suggestions between teachers and students, is a tangible form of internalizing transformational leadership. The ability to manage criticism openly and provide constructive advice is a very high indicator of emotional and intellectual maturity for a young leader. In this session, students learn that leadership does not mean being free from criticism, but rather the ability to listen and respond to input in an ethical and argumentative way. When compared to formal, one-way classroom interactions, these critical sessions provide space for students to practice "civic courage" within the framework of civility. This aims to make students accustomed to facing complex dialectics in collective decision-making.

The expansion of the scope of deliberations through the School Citizen Communication Forum (FKWS) emphasizes that student leadership in this institution is directed at mastering *stakeholder management*. By involving all elements of the school from the principal to the janitor and canteen guards, MPK administrators learn to lead in the diversity of social strata and work functions. This engagement provides empirical evidence that students are being trained to comprehensively understand social structures and have empathy for every layer of school society. Compared to forums that are exclusive only to certain groups, FKWS builds an inclusive and populist leadership spirit. The long-term goal is the birth of leaders who are able to embrace all aspirations without discrimination.

Leadership in MPK programs such as student council supervision and MPK's Corner also shows the existence of control and transparency functions carried out by students. This supervisory function educates students to have integrity and objectivity in assessing the performance of partner organizations, which is an important element in *good*

governance. Through activities such as the MPK Gathering, internal cohesion among young leaders is strengthened to ensure that the school's grand vision is maintained. This approach offers a leadership perspective based on a system of *checks and balances*, which is rarely found in conventional student organizations. This is expected to be able to form the character of students who are accountable and responsible for every leadership mandate given.

The series of communication and supervision forum programs managed by MPK at SMA IT Daarul Istiqlal is an effective pedagogical instrument in transforming students into agents of solution change. Through deliberation and extensive involvement of school residents, leadership is no longer understood as a position of power, but as a function of service and a bridge of communication. The success of internalizing values through these forums can be seen in the students' ability to manage conflicts, build consensus, and maintain harmony in the school environment. This pattern proves that by providing meaningful participation spaces, schools can produce future leaders who have social intelligence, personal integrity, and qualified intellectual capacity (Yulianti et al., 2022).

Perception of Leadership Program Formation

Students at SMA IT Daarul Istiqlal view their involvement in various school agendas as an identity discovery process that goes beyond the usual study routine. This is based on the belief that every responsibility given is a test of their independence and courage to appear as empowered subjects. Theoretically, this perspective shows the internalization of values where students no longer feel as objects of school policy, but rather the main actors in change. Compared to an environment that only demands academic compliance, the atmosphere at this school stimulates students to see themselves as influential individuals. The target is the instilling in the belief that their capacity will only grow if they dare to take on roles outside their comfort zone.

The rationale behind the students' enthusiasm arises from a sense of pride in the school culture that positions the organization as a symbol of maturity. Students feel that the trust given by teachers to manage independent activities is a form of appreciation for their intellectual abilities. This is evidenced by the willingness of students to spend more time at school to ensure the success of a communication forum or a big agenda. A striking difference can be seen in the emergence of motivation born from a sense of personal challenge, not due to the pressure of formal

rules. Thus, students interpret each assignment as a space to prove that they are able to carry out the mandate with high standards.

In responding to the pressure between organizational tasks and the demands of academic values, students develop a strategic awareness of the value of sacrifice for long-term character growth. They consider the risk of a temporary decline in performance as a price worth paying for managerial maturity that is not taught in the textbook. Based on observations in the field, students begin to realize that failure to manage time is not the end of everything, but rather a valuable lesson about the priority scale. When compared to the anxiety of parents who are only fixated on numbers, students actually feel more resilient because they are used to facing the consequences of their own choices. This aims to make students have strong mental resilience in facing various pressures in the future.

The existence of dialogical forums such as FKG M provides an emotional experience for students that their opinions have weight in the eyes of teachers and management. Students feel an equality of dignity in arguing, where their criticism is accepted as constructive input for school improvement. This experience of being listened to sincerely builds an extraordinary confidence that the voices of young people are able to drive policy. In contrast to schools that implement one-way communication, the practice in these institutions creates a more humanist and democratic relationship. The goal of this experience is to grow awareness that leading means being able to listen and communicate the truth in an ethical way.

The leadership aspect in the field, such as in the Scout squad, is felt by students as a laboratory to practice empathy and decision-making in critical moments. They realize that challenges on the ground often don't have a single answer, so teamwork is the only rational way out. The experience of facing conflicts in the squad provides a lesson that a leader should not walk alone, but must be able to embrace the diversity of the character of his members. Compared to the formalistic understanding of leadership, this interaction in the field provides an understanding that the best solutions are born from inclusive deliberation. This is expected to be able to form a proactive character and not give up easily when facing a situation impasse.

The way students interpret the formation of this leadership program cumulatively gives birth to visionary individuals with high integrity. Leadership is finally felt not as a position, but as a life attitude that is reflected in responsibility, discipline, and concern for others. This success can be seen in the determination of students to remain active even in the

midst of the pressure of great academic expectations. Compared to a system that pampers students, this educational model in schools provides the belief that difficulties are the best teachers in shaping personality. Finally, this meaningful experience will be the main provision for them to continue to make a positive contribution wherever they are in the future.

Conclusions

This study concludes that the 'School of Leadership' model at SMA IT Daarul Istiqlal is internalized through an experiential learning approach integrated across all educational dimensions. Leadership values are organically manifested through classroom dynamics, extracurricular activities requiring managerial agility, and inclusive dialogue forums, all supported by a strong institutional habitus. While a tension exists between organizational intensity and academic demands, the strategic mentorship of teachers and student autonomy in priority-setting facilitate a balanced character maturation process. Ultimately, the findings suggest that active involvement in decision-making and conflict resolution fosters critical awareness and transformational leadership traits. By valuing student agency and systemic integration, this model offers a paradigm shift in character education—transitioning from purely cognitive achievement toward the formation of resilient agents of change with high integrity.

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