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The Character-Based Leadership: A Case Study of the Decision-Making Process of the Principal

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Abstract

This study aims to examine how character-based leadership influences the decisions made by the principal of An Nur Kindergarten in Malang and how those decisions impact the quality of early childhood education. A qualitative case study design was employed to gather data. Methods included in-depth interviews with the principal and teachers, direct observation of learning and managerial activities, and a review of school policies and programs. Data were analyzed through stages of reduction, presentation, and thematic analysis. The findings reveal that the principal's character-based leadership is reflected in a participatory and responsive decision-making process grounded in moral principles such as honesty, empathy, and responsibility. This decision-making process enhances the quality of learning, fosters an inclusive educational environment, and strengthens a school culture that supports children's social and emotional development. The results demonstrate that character-based leadership plays a strategic role in the principal's decision-making within early childhood education institutions. Furthermore, this type of leadership is a crucial component in improving the quality of early childhood education.

Keywords: *decision-making, principal leadership, leadership development strategy.*

INTRODUCTION

Decisions made by school principals in education—particularly in early childhood education (PAUD)—significantly influence the quality of education received by children (Jaya, et. al., 2021; Nabila, et al., 2025; Mailani, *et al.*, 2023). From the perspective of educational management, decision-making is understood as a systematic process of selecting the best alternative to achieve educational organizational goals effectively and sustainably. In the context of school leadership, decision-making is not merely a technical-administrative matter; it is also deeply imbued

with values, ethics, and moral responsibility regarding student development. Although various leadership theories support the decision-making process in educational institutions, actual practice in the field often fails to fully reflect those theoretical frameworks (Daus, 2025; Purba, 2025; Novita & Meilani, 2025; Harsoyo, 2022).

One relevant approach in the context of early childhood education is character-based leadership—a model that places moral values such as honesty, responsibility, empathy, and exemplary conduct at the core of every decision-making process. This approach is grounded in the premise that the school principal acts as a role model who shapes the school's culture through decisions rooted in educational and humanistic values. However, a practical challenge that has emerged is the lack of application of these character-based leadership principles in decision-making, as principals tend to focus their attention on routine tasks that are political and administrative in nature. (Ulfi Latifah, *et al.,* 2024). Various empirical findings indicate that school principals often make decisions reactively rather than strategically, which impacts the quality of instruction and school management (Cahyanti, 2025; Destiyani, et al, 2025; Setiabudi, et al, 2025; Fery Refmil Hutasoit, 2024; Taufik Nor, 2025).

To improve the quality of early childhood education, there is a gap between ideal leadership theory and leadership practices in the field (Sahadi *et al.,* 2020). Theoretically, educational leadership requires a school principal to integrate managerial, pedagogical, and character-related aspects into every decision-making process—particularly in early childhood education settings, which emphasize children's social and emotional development. This situation raises a significant question: how does the decision-making process employed by the principal of TK An Nur Malang reflect leadership theories oriented toward the development of both the school and the children?

Several previous studies have highlighted the importance of principal leadership in improving the quality of education. For example, research by Ambawani *et al.,* (2024), shows that the principal's transformational leadership can encourage positive changes in the teaching and learning process. However, several other studies, such as those conducted by Musa *et al.,* (2022) revealed that the leadership of school principals at the PAUD level is often hampered by limited human resources and infrastructure. In addition, a study by Faturohman, (2021) It has been identified that early childhood education (PAUD) principals tend to focus more on administrative aspects than on character-based educational development. These findings indicate that the character dimension of leadership has not yet become a primary priority in the decision-making processes of PAUD principals. Therefore, this study aims to address this research gap by conducting an in-depth examination of the decision-making process of the principal at TK An Nur Malang—a process that ought to place greater emphasis on principles of character-based leadership and educational sustainability.

This study offers a different approach compared to previous research, especially in understanding the relationship between leadership theory and principal decision-making practices. According to Mirsa *et al.,* (2024), One characteristic of effective leadership is a school principal's ability to consider the social and cultural factors of the school environment during the decision-making process. In the context of early childhood education, social and cultural factors significantly influence children's character development and school dynamics. This study also examines how principals develop leadership skills that align with children's developmental needs, rather than relying solely on administrative considerations (Septia Putri A, *et al*., 2021). Furthermore, this study explicitly links the concept of character-based leadership to the sustainability

of educational development at the early childhood education (PAUD) level—a topic that has received relatively limited attention in previous literature.

This study aims to examine how the decision-making process employed by the principal of TK An Nur Malang reflects character-based leadership theory, which focuses on child and school development. Accordingly, the research questions addressed are: how character-based leadership influences the social and emotional development of early childhood students; how the principal of TK An Nur Malang involves various stakeholders in decision-making processes related to educational quality; how the principal creates an inclusive educational environment for students with special needs; and what key challenges the principal faces in decision-making within the current era of digital technology (Febriantini et al., 2025).

Based on this theoretical framework, it can be assumed that the principal of TK An Nur Malang is capable of creating a higher-quality educational environment by making decisions grounded in character-based leadership. Decisions that emphasize children's character development and educational sustainability have the potential to positively impact the quality of education at the school. This aligns with the findings by Putikadyanto *et al.,* (2024) who which states that educational decisions taking into account the needs and potential of each child can create a learning atmosphere more conducive to the child's growth and development. In parallel, this study also examines how school principals manage social and cultural challenges in the school's environment to support more effective decision-making.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design utilizing case study and grounded research approaches. These approaches were selected to explore in depth the decision-making processes of the principal at TK An Nur Malang, focusing on the social and cultural contexts as well as the characteristics of the school's educational environment. The study was conducted at TK An Nur Malang, chosen for its extensive experience in navigating the challenges of early childhood education and for having a principal actively involved in decisions regarding educational quality and character development.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling—a method involving the deliberate choice of individuals based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. The primary informant was the principal of TK An Nur Malang, while supporting informants included classroom teachers, administrative staff, and parents deemed knowledgeable about and involved in the school's decision-making processes. Selection was based on considerations of experience, roles, and direct involvement in the managerial and instructional activities at the school.

Additionally, other relevant individuals—such as parents—were interviewed, and pertinent texts (e.g., education policy documents and related news reports) were examined to provide further insight. Data collection involved several methods: a desk review of key documents; direct field observation; semi-structured interviews guided by a prepared protocol; and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with teachers and staff to delve into their perspectives on the principal's decisions.

Data analysis proceeded through stages of condensation, display, and verification (drawing conclusions), utilizing content analysis, discourse analysis, and interpretive analysis to understand the meaning behind the principal's decision-making processes. These analytical methods enabled a comprehensive understanding of the decisions made and their impact on the quality of education at TK An Nur Malang. The study was

conducted between November and December 2025, encompassing the phases of preparation, field data collection, and data analysis. The timing of this study was determined to ensure the researcher obtained sufficient and in-depth data aligned with the research focus.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

a. Character-Based Leadership in the School Principal's Decision-Making Process

Research findings indicate that the principal's character-based leadership at An Nur Kindergarten in Malang is manifested in a decision-making process oriented toward moral values such as responsibility, fairness, empathy, and leading by example. The principal does not position themselves merely as the ultimate decision-maker but rather as a moral leader who considers the impact of every policy on early childhood development and the continuity of the school culture. This demonstrates that the decisions made are not driven by short-term pragmatism but are instead directed toward long-term educational goals.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that the principal's decisions are influenced by an ethical awareness regarding the leadership of the early childhood education institution. The decision-making process takes into account the input of teachers, the needs of the students, and the values that have become ingrained in the school culture. This approach indicates that character-based leadership serves as a normative framework guiding the principal in determining the direction of school policy. Consequently, the resulting decisions are not only administratively effective but also morally legitimate in the eyes of the school community.

Table 1. Summary of Observation Data on Principal Leadership

Aspects Observed	Field Observation Results
Decision-making patterns	Strategic decisions regarding the school are discussed through teacher meetings and internal discussions.
Leadership approach	The principal demonstrates an open and persuasive attitude and sets a good example.
Teacher involvement	Teachers are involved in the formulation of learning policies.
Value orientation	The decision takes into account the child's comfort, safety, and development.

(Source: Research Data, 2025).

b. The Impact of the Decision-Making Process on the Quality of Education

Research findings indicate that the character-based decision-making process employed by the school principal directly influences the improvement of educational quality at An Nur Kindergarten in Malang. Decisions made by the principal do not merely focus on administrative aspects but are also directed toward strengthening the quality of instruction, curriculum management, and the enhancement of educator competence. In the context of early childhood education (PAUD), educational quality is understood holistically, encompassing the quality of interactions, the learning environment, and children's socio-emotional development.

Participatory decision-making fosters a sense of ownership among teachers regarding school policies. Teachers are not simply implementers of policy; they are also involved in processes of reflection and evaluation, resulting in decisions that are more contextual and realistic. This approach leads to increased teacher motivation in

delivering instruction and fosters a collaborative work atmosphere within the school environment.

Table 2. Summary of Integrated Interview Findings

Informant	Main Themes of the Interview	Key Findings
School Principal	Basis for decision-making	The decision is based on character values and the child's needs.
Teacher	Involvement in decision-making	Teachers feel involved and more responsible.
Teacher	Learning environment	School policies support child-friendly learning.
Parent	School response	The school is responsive to children's needs and development.

(Source: Research Data, 2025).

c. The Role of School Principal Leadership in Creating an Inclusive and Responsive Educational Environment

Research findings reveal that the leadership of the TK An Nur Malang principal plays a strategic role in establishing an inclusive and responsive educational environment. The principal makes decisions that ensure every child—including those with special needs—receives fair learning opportunities free from discrimination. These inclusive policies are reflected in the management of instruction, support for teachers, and the tailoring of educational services to the specific characteristics of the students.

A responsive educational environment is also fostered through the principal's ability to interpret and address dynamics arising within the school setting. This responsiveness is evident in the prompt and context-aware decision-making regarding instructional and social issues, as well as the children's developmental needs. Consequently, the school serves not merely as a place of learning but also as a safe space that supports the holistic growth of the children.

d. Leadership Development Strategies for Addressing Decision-Making Challenges in the Modern Era

Research findings indicate that the principal of An Nur Kindergarten in Malang has developed an adaptive leadership strategy to address decision-making challenges in the modern era. These challenges encompass shifting educational policies, demands for technology integration, and the complex needs of students and parents. In navigating these conditions, the principal employs character-based leadership as the fundamental basis for establishing priorities and the direction of school policy.

The adaptive leadership strategy implemented reflects the principal's effort to maintain a balance between innovation and educational values. The use of technology and the adoption of new approaches to school management are not treated merely as technical matters; rather, they are subject to ethical and reflective consideration to ensure alignment with the goals of early childhood education. This demonstrates that leadership character serves as a primary filter for decision-making amidst the rapid pace of change.

The research findings indicate that the character-based leadership of the An Nur Malang Kindergarten principal is reflected in a decision-making process that is participatory, responsive, and grounded in moral values. The principal acts not merely as a decision-maker but also creates opportunities for teachers and relevant stakeholders to share their opinions, experiences, and needs. This process demonstrates that school

decisions are formulated through communication and collective deliberation, ensuring they are contextually aligned with the institution's conditions and the children's needs.

Values such as honesty, empathy, and responsibility serve as essential foundations for the decision-making process. Honesty is reflected in the openness with which issues are addressed and information is objectively considered, while empathy is evident in the concern shown for the well-being of teachers, children, and parents. Responsibility is demonstrated by the principal's willingness to consider the consequences of decisions, conduct monitoring, and take follow-up actions if a decision fails to yield the expected outcomes.

This decision-making pattern contributes to the creation of an educational environment that is safer, more open, and inclusive. Involving teachers in the decision-making process fosters a sense of ownership regarding school policies and encourages collaboration during their implementation. In the context of early childhood education, character-based leadership also impacts children's social and emotional development. A principal who embodies honesty, empathy, and responsibility in their leadership practices sets an example that helps shape the school culture.

Thus, character-based leadership can be viewed as a strategic component in enhancing the quality of early childhood education. The research findings reveal a series of interconnected processes: the principal's character influences decision-making patterns; these patterns shape relationships and school culture; and the school culture supports the quality of learning as well as the children's social-emotional development. These findings reinforce the view that improving the quality of early childhood education depends not only on pedagogical aspects but also on the quality of leadership capable of integrating moral values, participation, responsibility, and an orientation toward the best interests of the child.

Discussion

Research findings indicating that the principal of An Nur Malang Kindergarten employs participatory and responsive decision-making demonstrate that character-based leadership operates through relational processes rather than solely through formal authority. Involving teachers in decision-making enables the principal to gather diverse information regarding instructional issues and children's needs. This situation illustrates the principal's role as a facilitator who develops the collective capacity of the school community. This aligns with the view that leadership in early childhood education plays a crucial role in enhancing the quality of the learning process through staff development, collaboration, and the creation of an organizational culture that supports continuous improvement (Douglass, 2019).

The study reveals that the character-based leadership of the An Nur Malang Kindergarten principal is reflected in a decision-making process that is participatory, responsive, and grounded in moral values. The principal acts not merely as a decision-maker but also creates opportunities for teachers and relevant stakeholders to share their opinions, experiences, and needs. This supports earlier findings emphasizing that decision-making processes should be value-oriented (Purnamawati et al., 2025; Okwedadi, 2025; Nurjaya et al., 2025; Starks, 2022), as high-quality moral character helps shape leadership characterized by integrity. Thus, participatory decision-making at An Nur Malang Kindergarten can be understood as a leadership strategy that yields more contextually relevant decisions while strengthening teacher engagement in achieving educational goals. These findings align with the view Sabariah *et al.,* (2024) which emphasizes that the leadership of the principal in PAUD units needs to be based on

strengthening character so that the decisions taken are able to create a positive educational climate, and are strengthened by Hilalludin et al., (2025) which emphasizes the importance of ideal leadership character in educational decision-making. In addition, the concept of value-based leadership put forward by Rustandi & Syafei, (2025) This reinforces the research findings that moral values do not hinder leadership effectiveness; rather, they actually strengthen the quality of educational decisions.

The values of honesty, empathy, and responsibility identified in the study demonstrate that a principal's character serves as an ethical foundation for making choices and resolving organizational issues. Honesty enables decision-making based on transparent information, while empathy prompts principals to consider the needs and perspectives of teachers, children, and parents. Meanwhile, responsibility is reflected in a principal's willingness to consider the consequences of decisions and undertake necessary follow-up actions. These findings reinforce the perspective that ethical leadership is not merely about a leader's personal character but also about how moral values are translated into professional actions and decisions. Arar and Saiti (2022) explain that school administrators face various ethical dilemmas, making moral considerations, fairness, care, and responsibility essential to the decision-making process. In the context of early childhood education (PAUD), this orientation is particularly relevant, as the Foundation Phase Learning Outcomes (CP) position compassion, honesty, fairness, and responsibility as integral components of a child's character development (Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, 2025a). The results of this study reinforce the findings Susanto *et al.,* (2025) which states that participatory decision-making has a positive correlation with the improvement of school quality. Aristiati, (2022) also emphasized that the quality of education is greatly influenced by the quality of pedagogical decisions made by school leaders. In line with this, Ambawani et al., (2024) which states that transparent and collaborative decision-making by school principals has a significant impact on the quality of education. In the context of early childhood education (PAUD), educational quality is measured not only by academic aspects but also by the quality of interactions, the learning environment, and children's social-emotional development.

The finding that character-based leadership contributes to creating a safe, open, and inclusive educational environment demonstrates that the quality of a principal's decisions impacts the school's organizational culture. When teachers are given the opportunity to voice their opinions and are involved in problem-solving, they develop a sense of ownership over the resulting decisions, thereby strengthening collaboration during implementation. In early childhood education, this dynamic is crucial because the quality of the work environment and teachers' professional relationships are linked to the quality of the learning experiences children undergo (Douglass, 2019).

From an early childhood education perspective, research findings indicate that a principal's character can contribute to children's social and emotional development by shaping the school culture. Principals serve as role models for behavior among teachers and the wider school community. The values demonstrated during decision-making processes can be reflected in daily interactions within the educational setting. When honesty, empathy, responsibility, and respect for others are consistently practiced, the school can evolve into a social environment that supports holistic child development.

These results are consistent with the research Komarudin, (2023) which affirms that inclusive leadership is capable of creating a fair and participatory school climate. Alparij & Muttaqin, (2026) also stated that the principal has a central role in ensuring that school

policies are able to accommodate the diverse needs of students. The inclusive education perspective put forward by Mega Rif'atul A, *et al.,* (2021) also Nur Safitri et al., (2025) which emphasizes that inclusive leadership is capable of creating a fair and child-friendly learning environment. Responsive leadership also enables schools to adapt to social dynamics and the evolving needs of learners. These findings support the view Mesiono *et al.,* (2024) which states that educational leaders in the era of globalization are required to possess adaptive and visionary capabilities. Zayrin et al., (2024) also emphasized that school principals as visionary leaders need to integrate moral values with leadership innovation. The challenges of digital-based educational transformation raised by Haq et al., (2023) further reinforcing the relevance of these research findings in the context of modern education.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that character-based leadership—particularly regarding the principal's decision-making at An Nur Kindergarten in Malang—significantly impacts educational quality and fosters an inclusive, responsive environment. A key finding is the importance of a participatory decision-making process grounded in character values; such a process not only enhances educational quality but also creates an atmosphere that supports diversity and the holistic development of students.

This paper contributes to the field by updating perspectives on the principal's role in character-based decision-making. Through this case study, the research highlights the necessity for educational leaders to possess not only technical skills but also strong character when making decisions that drive educational improvement. Furthermore, the study introduces the importance of data-driven and collaborative decision-making as means to enhance educational quality at the early childhood education (PAUD) level, offering fresh insights into leadership approaches and strategies.

As this research is limited to a case study of An Nur Kindergarten in Malang, the findings cannot be generalized to all schools in Indonesia. Additionally, limitations regarding location, student age, and gender variables must be acknowledged, as these factors can influence school decision-making dynamics. The study relies on a qualitative approach—specifically in-depth interviews—suggesting that future research could incorporate broader survey methods to obtain a more comprehensive overview. Consequently, further research that accounts for variations in age, gender, and location, while employing survey methods, would be highly valuable in establishing a robust foundation for formulating more targeted and widely applicable educational policies.

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