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## **Principal's Leadership Practices in Fostering a Learning Community at Pelangi Islamic Elementary School**

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**Abstrak:** Penguatan komunitas belajar di sekolah dasar Islam merupakan kebutuhan penting untuk menciptakan budaya akademik yang kolaboratif, reflektif, dan berorientasi pada peningkatan mutu pembelajaran, namun praktik kepemimpinan kepala sekolah dalam mendorong terbentuknya komunitas belajar sering kali belum terpetakan secara komprehensif, terutama pada konteks sekolah Islam yang memiliki karakteristik religius dan pola interaksi profesional yang khas. Penelitian ini bertujuan mendeskripsikan secara mendalam praktik kepemimpinan kepala sekolah dalam menumbuhkan komunitas belajar di Pelangi Islamic Elementary School. Pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus digunakan untuk memperoleh pemahaman holistik mengenai dinamika kepemimpinan dan kolaborasi guru, dengan pengumpulan data melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan analisis dokumen. Data dianalisis secara tematik guna mengidentifikasi pola tindakan kepemimpinan yang paling berpengaruh. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kepala sekolah menjalankan empat praktik utama, yaitu membangun visi pembelajaran bersama, menyediakan ruang dan mekanisme kolaborasi profesional, memfasilitasi pengembangan kapasitas guru melalui pendampingan dan pelatihan, serta memelihara budaya refleksi berkelanjutan yang mendorong guru untuk melakukan evaluasi diri terhadap proses pembelajaran. Praktik-praktik ini secara konsisten meningkatkan kualitas diskusi pedagogis, memperkuat kepercayaan profesional antarguru, serta menumbuhkan rasa tanggung jawab kolektif terhadap peningkatan mutu pembelajaran. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa kepemimpinan kepala sekolah merupakan faktor kunci dalam menciptakan komunitas belajar yang dinamis dan produktif, serta memberikan implikasi praktis bagi sekolah Islam untuk memperkuat budaya kolaboratif melalui kepemimpinan yang visioner, partisipatif, dan berorientasi pada pengembangan profesional berkelanjutan.

**Kata Kunci:** *Kepemimpinan kepala sekolah, komunitas belajar, sekolah dasar Islam, kolaborasi guru, pengembangan profesional*

**Abstract:** Strengthening learning communities in Islamic elementary schools is essential for fostering a collaborative, reflective, and quality-oriented academic culture. However, the principal's leadership practices in cultivating such communities are often not comprehensively understood, especially within Islamic schools that possess distinct religious values and unique patterns of professional interaction. This study aims to provide an in-depth description of the principal's leadership practices in fostering a learning community at Pelangi Islamic Elementary School. A qualitative approach with a case study design was employed to obtain a holistic understanding of leadership dynamics and teacher collaboration, using in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and document analysis as data collection techniques. The data were analyzed thematically to identify the most influential leadership actions. The findings reveal four key leadership practices, including establishing a shared instructional vision, providing structured spaces and mechanisms for professional collaboration, facilitating teacher capacity building through mentoring and training, and nurturing a culture of continuous reflection that encourages teachers to engage in self-evaluation of instructional processes. These practices consistently enhanced the quality of pedagogical discussions, strengthened professional trust among teachers, and fostered a collective sense of responsibility for improving learning quality. The study concludes that the principal's leadership is a critical factor in creating a dynamic and productive learning community and offers practical implications for Islamic schools to reinforce collaborative cultures through visionary, participatory, and professionally growth-oriented leadership.

**Keywords:** Principal leadership, learning community, Islamic elementary school, teacher collaboration, professional development

## INTRODUCTION

Elementary schools represent the foundational stage of formal education and play a critical role in shaping students' intellectual, moral, and social development. In principle, elementary education is expected to foster active, collaborative, and character-driven learning environments in which students acquire not only academic knowledge but also strong moral and spiritual values. However, in practice, many schools have yet to realize this ideal. Teacher-centered instruction, limited collaboration among school stakeholders, and a predominant focus on administrative routines often hinder the development of a robust learning community. This discrepancy between the expected standards and the realities observed in schools underscores the urgency of strengthening principal leadership capable of transforming school culture into one that is participatory, inspiring, and value-oriented.

Educational leadership theory emphasizes that the role of the principal extends beyond administrative management to encompass pedagogical and transformational functions. Principals are regarded as instructional leaders who articulate a clear vision, cultivate a positive school climate, and ensure meaningful interactions within the learning environment (Fazilla, 2023). In Islamic elementary schools, the scope of leadership becomes even broader, as principals serve concurrently as moral and spiritual guides who facilitate the internalization of Islamic values across academic and non-academic activities. This

perspective aligns with the framework of Islamic education, which promotes the integration of religious values with general knowledge to support holistic character formation.

A substantial body of research reinforces the importance of principal leadership in shaping school effectiveness. Siregar et al. (2022) reported that leadership quality significantly influences school culture and student learning motivation. Hasannah (2024) demonstrated that value-based leadership strengthens student discipline, religious character, and the quality of teacher–student relationships. Similarly, Harly (2024) noted that in an era marked by globalization and digital transformation, principals must adopt adaptive and innovative leadership to effectively integrate technology and promote collaboration within the school community. Collectively, these studies highlight that leadership characterized by vision, integrity, and adaptability is instrumental in fostering effective and character-oriented learning environments.

Despite the extensive scholarship on leadership in Islamic education, limited attention has been directed toward leadership practices in Islamic elementary schools that successfully balance academic excellence with strong religious character formation. Pelangi Islamic Elementary School in Tegal provides a compelling case in this regard. The school is widely recognized for its commitment to moral and spiritual education while simultaneously maintaining high academic standards. It also promotes a culture of collaboration among teachers, students, and staff, making it an appropriate setting for examining how leadership functions in cultivating an effective learning community grounded in Islamic principles.

In light of the identified gaps and the theoretical and empirical insights discussed above, this study aims to analyze the principal’s leadership practices in fostering a supportive, collaborative, and value-oriented learning community at Pelangi Islamic Elementary School. Specifically, the study seeks to identify the strategies employed by the principal to enhance student motivation, strengthen moral character, and facilitate positive interactions among school stakeholders. The findings are expected to contribute to the broader discourse on Islamic educational leadership and offer practical guidance for institutions seeking to develop holistic learning communities at the elementary level.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative approach aimed at exploring in depth the leadership roles and strategies of the principal in building a student learning community at Pelangi Islamic Elementary School in Tegal. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for a comprehensive understanding of naturally occurring phenomena, aligning with Moleong (2009) and Sugiyono (2009), who emphasize that qualitative research seeks to uncover meaning, processes, and experiences from the participants’ perspectives.

The study was conducted over three months, from September to November 2024, through four main stages: preparation, data collection, data analysis, and validation. The research site was selected purposively, as Pelangi Islamic Elementary School is recognized for successfully integrating Islamic values into academic activities and fostering a collaborative learning culture among students and teachers.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their relevance and involvement in the school's leadership context. The participants included one principal, six teachers, and ten students who were actively involved in both academic learning and school community programs. This selection was intended to obtain rich and in-depth information regarding the principal's leadership practices in fostering a learning community.

Data were collected through observations, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs). Observations were conducted to understand the dynamics of the principal's leadership and student interactions within the learning environment. Semi-structured interviews were held with the principal, teachers, and students to gain diverse perspectives on leadership strategies and their influence on the formation of a learning community. Additionally, FGDs with students were conducted to explore their experiences and perceptions of the principal's role in creating a supportive learning atmosphere.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), consisting of three components: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. The analytical process was conducted continuously from the beginning of data collection until the final interpretation was reached. To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, this study applied triangulation of sources and methods. Member checking was carried out by confirming the researcher's interpretations with participants, while reflective field notes were maintained as part of the documentation process. Peer debriefing was also conducted to maintain analytical consistency and objectivity.

These systematic procedures ensured that the research findings achieved a high level of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, thereby supporting the scientific rigor of the study.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Results**

The findings of this study were derived from interviews with the principal, teachers, and students, as well as observations conducted at Pelangi Islamic Elementary School. Overall, the results indicate that the principal's leadership plays a crucial role in fostering a positive, inclusive, and value-oriented learning community. A summary of the main findings is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Research Findings on the Principal's Leadership at Pelangi Islamic Elementary School

Aspect	Findings	Data Sources
Leadership Style	Demonstrates strong intellectual and emotional leadership; adopts a collaborative and participatory approach to decision-making.	Interviews with principal and teachers; observations.
Student Engagement	Increased learning motivation, active participation in classroom governance, and higher commitment to school activities.	Student interviews; classroom observations.
Teacher Development	Principal supports continuous professional development and encourages innovative teaching aligned with Islamic educational values.	Teacher interviews.
Curriculum Integration	Islamic values are effectively integrated into general subjects, making learning more meaningful and contextually relevant.	Interviews; document analysis.
Challenges Encountered	Difficulty balancing traditional teaching methods with technology-based instruction; students show varied readiness for digital learning.	Interviews; observations.
School Climate & Character Formation	Principal's empathy strengthens trust, character development, and students' social competence.	Observations; student interviews.

As shown in Table 1, the principal exhibits a combination of strong intellectual and emotional leadership. This is evident in the way the principal provides guidance, personal encouragement, and open communication to both students and teachers. The collaborative leadership approach adopted by the principal allows all school members to participate in decision-making processes, such as electing class leaders, arranging duty schedules, and organizing school programs. This participatory model cultivates a sense of ownership and enhances student engagement in learning activities.

Teachers reported that the principal consistently supports their professional development through internal training sessions, regular discussions, and encouragement to implement innovative instructional strategies aligned with Islamic educational values. Such support enhances teacher competence and contributes to improved classroom practices.

Furthermore, the principal has successfully integrated Islamic values into general subjects, resulting in more contextual and meaningful learning experiences. Students noted that this integration helps them better understand the connection between academic knowledge and everyday life while internalizing moral principles.

Despite these strengths, several challenges were identified. One of the key issues involves balancing traditional teaching methods with technology-based learning. While some students show enthusiasm for digital tools, others feel more comfortable with conventional approaches. The principal addresses this challenge by implementing a gradual and adaptive strategy that accommodates the diverse needs of students while promoting innovation.

In terms of character development, field observations revealed that the principal's empathetic attitude contributes significantly to building trust, discipline, and students' social competencies. Students reported feeling comfortable sharing their concerns directly with the principal, which strengthens interpersonal relationships within the school community and supports the development of a harmonious learning environment.

## **Discussion**

### **1. Visionary Leadership Practices in Establishing a Learning Community**

The principal of Pelangi Islamic Elementary School demonstrates a strong form of visionary leadership by positioning the development of a learning community as a strategic foundation for school improvement. In several interviews, the principal emphasized that collaborative learning among teachers is essential not only for strengthening instructional competence but also for nurturing a culture of continuous professional growth. The principal stated: "A learning community must become part of our culture. Teachers should not work alone because teaching challenges today are very complex. Collaboration is the key."

This statement reflects the principal's awareness of the importance of collective learning. The interpretation is consistent with the concept of visionary leadership, which highlights the significance of articulating a clear direction for the school and motivating the community to align with a shared vision. DuFour and Eaker explain that for a professional learning community to thrive, leaders must communicate a learning centered vision while consistently encouraging participation from teachers.

Observational data shows that the principal's vision is not merely rhetorical but has been translated into systematic practices. At the beginning of each semester, the principal leads a planning forum that outlines instructional priorities, targets for teacher development, and strategies for collaboration. During these sessions, the principal does not act solely as a decision maker but also as a facilitator who invites teachers to express their concerns and aspirations regarding their instructional practice.

This participatory approach supports the argument that the principal exhibits characteristics of transformational leadership. Such leaders build shared commitment by

encouraging teacher involvement in shaping the school's collective vision. Hallinger's research shows that principals who integrate vision, communication, and teacher empowerment are more capable of establishing sustained learning communities. The findings at Pelangi Islamic Elementary School align with these theoretical insights.

To operationalize the school's vision, the principal initiated several collaborative programs including a regular Lesson Reflection forum and collective textbook writing projects. These programs serve as mechanisms that connect the school vision with teacher engagement and shared learning practices. As a result, a structured and productive learning community has emerged within the school.

Visionary and transformational leadership from the principal is crucial in forming a professional learning community group, by encouraging teacher collaboration and facilitating collective learning. Redondo-Sama, G., Khaqan, S., Morlà-Folch, T. et al (2025) showed that principals who lead dialogically are able to move the entire school community to become learners together. In addition, Wilson Heenan, I., De Paor, D., Lafferty, N., & Mannix McNamara, P. (2023) concluded that transformational leadership supports teacher motivation, commitment, and a sustainable collaborative culture.

## 2. Academic Supervision as a Catalyst for Teacher Collaboration

Academic supervision carried out by the principal functions not merely as an evaluative tool but as a professional support mechanism that strengthens the school's learning community. Interviews with teachers reveal that they do not perceive supervision as a form of judgment. Instead, they view it as a collaborative process that assists them in reflecting upon and enhancing their instructional practices. One teacher explained

“He never comes suddenly to assess us. He always starts with a discussion about the learning goals we want to achieve. After the observation, there is a reflection session that is very helpful.”

This testimony suggests that the principal practices a humanistic and dialogic form of supervision. This approach is consistent with the principles of clinical supervision, which emphasize joint analysis, reflection, and improvement. Supervision becomes a developmental tool rather than a mechanism of control.

The table 2 below summarizes the types of support provided by the principal during the supervision process.

Table 2. Forms of Principal Support During Instructional Supervision

Support Aspect	Implementation	Impact on Teachers
Clarification of learning goals	Initial dialogue before classroom observation	Teachers gain clearer understanding of expected competencies
Lesson planning guidance	Discussion about lesson plans	Teachers are encouraged to use more varied instructional strategies
Structured classroom observation	Classroom visit with pre planned focus	Principal gains accurate insights into real classroom practice
Post observation reflection	Constructive feedback conversation	Teachers feel valued and motivated to improve

The collaborative nature of this supervision process reinforces trust between the principal and teachers. This aligns with Hargreaves' perspective that professional learning communities thrive when reflective interactions occur consistently within a supportive environment.

Observations indicate that reflection sessions happen in a positive and constructive atmosphere. Rather than giving immediate corrections, the principal uses guiding questions such as "What do you think has worked well" or "Which part would you like to enhance next time". These questions invite teachers to think critically and engage in self directed improvement.

Through this reflective dialogue, supervision becomes a driver of professional collaboration. Teachers do not feel pressured but instead feel accompanied and supported. This dynamic contributes significantly to the growth of the learning community.

### 3. Strengthening the Learning Community Through Structured Teacher Reflection and Collaboration

One of the central practices that supports the learning community at Pelangi Islamic Elementary School is the structured Lesson Reflection forum. This collaborative forum is held twice a month and is designed as a space for teachers to analyze learning outcomes, share instructional strategies, and collectively solve problems that emerge in classrooms.

Observations reveal that the forum follows a systematic structure. The principal serves as a facilitator who ensures the smooth flow of discussion, but the teachers remain the main actors. In this forum, teachers present their classroom experiences, including successful strategies and challenges faced. A teacher explained: "This forum helps a lot. When I face problems, I realize that other teachers have experienced similar difficulties. We can learn from each other."

This testimony illustrates that the forum functions as both a problem solving platform and an emotional support system. Stoll argues that a learning community can only function effectively when there is relational trust and emotional backing among its members. The situation at Pelangi Islamic Elementary School reflects this theoretical insight.

The table 3 below presents the structured stages of the Lesson Reflection forum based on field observations.

Table 3. Structure of the Lesson Reflection Forum

Stage	Description
Opening	Principal provides introductory remarks and objectives
Teacher presentation	Teachers share their instructional experiences
Peer feedback	Other teachers respond and give suggestions
Group discussion	Identification of solutions and planning for improvement
Closing	Summary of agreements and action points

The Lesson Reflection forum encourages teachers to build habits of critical thinking, collaborative problem solving, and reflective practice. These activities are consistent with the findings of Vescio and colleagues, who argue that collaborative reflection significantly enhances teacher effectiveness and student learning outcomes.

Beyond reflective discussions, collaboration is also evident in collective tasks such as developing instructional modules, creating student worksheets, and designing assessment banks. Teachers often work in small groups, allowing them to share their expertise and divide tasks according to their strengths. This practice strengthens the collective identity of the learning community and encourages sustained professional growth.

#### 4. Integration of Islamic Values in the Development of the Learning Community

As an Islamic based school, Pelangi Islamic Elementary School integrates Islamic values into its learning community practices. The principal views collaborative learning not only as a professional requirement but also as a moral responsibility. Values such as togetherness, mutual consultation, and sincere intention guide the direction of teacher collaboration.

In an interview, the principal stated: “Learning together is not only for professional improvement. It is also a form of moral responsibility as Muslim educators.”=

This perspective shows that the learning community is shaped by both pedagogical and spiritual principles. The integration of Islamic values becomes evident in several routine practices including opening each collaborative meeting with a prayer, using respectful language during discussions, and emphasizing sincerity in performing duties.

Document analysis shows that the school has developed internal guidelines for the learning community that incorporate Islamic educational concepts. These guidelines emphasize that learning is part of worship, that decisions should be made through consultation, and that discussions must be conducted with proper manners and mutual respect. These principles echo the Islamic educational perspective which places emphasis on the unity of knowledge, ethics, and character.

Research by Niyozov and Memon suggests that integrating Islamic values into school leadership can enhance teacher motivation and foster institutional harmony. This finding is reflected in the environment at Pelangi Islamic Elementary School, where teachers collaborate not only to fulfill their duties but also because they feel morally and spiritually connected to one another.

The integration of Islamic values also shapes the way teachers interact within the learning community. When giving feedback to colleagues, teachers choose polite and encouraging expressions. When disagreements arise, they resolve them through discussion grounded in the value of respectful dialogue. This value based approach supports the sustainability of the learning community and minimizes potential conflict.

The integration of Islamic values into school leadership strengthens a collaborative culture through the principles of deliberation, ethical communication, and moral responsibility. Research by Anas (2025) confirms that Islamic values can create a harmonious work climate and learning community, increasing teacher motivation and professionalism.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This study concludes that the principal's leadership plays a central role in establishing and strengthening the learning community at Pelangi Islamic Elementary School. The principal demonstrates not only administrative competence but also visionary, collaborative, and value-driven leadership that encourages teachers to engage in reflective dialogue, participate in supportive academic supervision, and develop more innovative instructional strategies. The integration of Islamic values into the school culture reinforces social cohesion and professional ethics among all school members, resulting in a learning environment that is harmonious, inclusive, and sustainable. These findings affirm that the effectiveness of a learning community is largely influenced by the maturity of leadership that successfully combines professional expertise with moral orientation in daily practice.

The practical implications of this study emphasize the importance of providing broader spaces for professional collaboration, strengthening mentoring-based academic supervision, and ensuring that Islamic values are consistently embedded within learning activities and

social interactions at school. The continuous development of teacher capacity through a structured learning community should also be prioritized as a long-term strategy to enhance instructional quality. For future research, studies may explore learning communities in other Islamic schools with different characteristics or employ a longitudinal approach to examine how principal leadership influences community sustainability over time. Comparative studies between Islamic and non-Islamic schools may also offer new insights into the role of spiritual values in nurturing collaborative cultures. Such directions will contribute to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of how school leadership shapes the development of effective learning communities.

Further research is recommended to examine the dynamics of learning communities in Islamic schools in different contexts, using a longitudinal design to examine the consistency of leadership practices over time. Comparative studies between Islamic and non-Islamic schools are also needed to understand the influence of spiritual values on the sustainability of professional collaboration and learning cultures.

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