

CULTURALLY-ROOTED SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: THE ROLE OF GUSJIGANG VALUES IN ENHANCING CHARACTER EDUCATION AT THE PRIMARY LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

In culturally diverse educational contexts, school leadership often fails to reflect the values and wisdom inherent in local traditions. In Indonesia, character education often relies on normative approaches, overlooking the potential of indigenous philosophies to inform ethical and behavioral development. This study examines how Gusjigang—a cultural value system rooted in Islamic moralism, literacy, and entrepreneurship—is integrated into primary school leadership and character education in Kudus Regency, Central Java. Using a quantitative survey design, data were collected from 15 principals and 85 teachers across randomly selected public elementary schools through a 30-item Likert-scale questionnaire. The results show that the dimension of religious commitment (Gus) is highly embedded in both leadership practices ($M = 3.72$) and character education ($M = 3.65$), followed by literacy cultivation (Ji) and entrepreneurial modeling (Gang), which were implemented to a moderate extent. These findings suggest that while the moral and intellectual components of Gusjigang are well-integrated, its entrepreneurial aspects remain underdeveloped within school culture. The novelty of this study lies in its culturally responsive leadership framework, grounded in a local philosophical tradition, which contributes to the discourse on contextualized character education. Practically, the study suggests that educational leaders and policymakers should incorporate local wisdom into leadership development and curriculum design to enhance character education that is not only globally relevant but also locally resonant. This research affirms the transformative potential of indigenous values, such as Gusjigang, in cultivating holistic educational environments and ethical school communities.

Keywords: Culturally responsive leadership; Gusjigang values; Local wisdom

INTRODUCTION

School leadership is widely recognized as a critical factor in determining the quality of education, particularly at the primary level, where foundational values, attitudes, and behaviors are cultivated. (Chen, 2024). While technical competence, policy implementation, and administrative proficiency have long been emphasized, there is a growing recognition that leadership must also be contextually grounded—deeply rooted in the socio-cultural and moral fabric of the community it serves (Abacioglu et al., 2023). In this regard, culturally responsive leadership has gained traction as an essential paradigm, especially in non-Western educational systems that face the dual challenge of maintaining cultural identity while addressing global standards. (McChesney & Cross, 2023).

As a nation of rich cultural diversity, Indonesia presents an essential case for examining the role of cultural values in shaping school leadership. (Hardiansyah & Zainuddin, 2022). Among the various local traditions that embody moral, spiritual, and work ethics, the *Gusjigang* philosophy from Kudus, Central Java, offers a unique synthesis of Islamic teachings, entrepreneurial spirit, and ethical behavior. The term *Gusjigang* is derived from the Javanese acronym *Gus* (good in religious knowledge), *Ji* (diligent in reading the Qur'an), and *Gang* (enterprising and active in the marketplace), encapsulating a holistic vision of character rooted in faith, literacy, and productivity. Initially popularized by Sunan Kudus, one of the Wali Songo, *Gusjigang* was not merely a personal ethic but a model of communal virtue that guided education, economic life, and social conduct.

Despite the strength of such indigenous philosophies, contemporary educational leadership in Indonesian schools—particularly in primary education—tends to mirror Western managerial models, often sidelining local wisdom. (Abacioglu et al., 2023). While efforts to promote character education have been mandated at the policy level (e.g., Presidential Regulation No. 87/2017 on Strengthening Character Education), there is limited exploration of how culturally grounded leadership can effectively operationalize these mandates. Given the moral challenges faced by Indonesian youth, including digital distractions and ethical relativism, recontextualizing leadership to incorporate traditional values such as *Gusjigang* is not only timely but also necessary. (Hardiansyah & Wahdian, 2023).

The dominant paradigm of school leadership in Indonesia often reflects bureaucratic and top-down managerial approaches, resulting in procedural rather than inspirational leadership and administrative rather than transformational leadership. (Demetriou et al., 2022). This is particularly problematic at the primary level, where character formation is as important as cognitive development. Furthermore, although character education is officially emphasized in the national curriculum, its actualization at the school level remains uneven and superficial, frequently limited to slogans or isolated activities rather than embedded cultural practices (García-Álvarez et al., 2023). There is also a notable gap in how school principals draw from local cultural resources to inform their leadership strategies.

In this context, the absence of culturally rooted leadership weakens the internalization of character education and distances schools from their communities and moral traditions. This problem is exacerbated by a lack of empirical research exploring how local values, such as *Gusjigang*, can be operationalized in school leadership practices. What is missing is a coherent understanding of how cultural philosophies can inform leadership approaches, influence school culture, and enhance student character formation.

The urgency of this research stems from the moral and ethical crisis that increasingly affects primary education in Indonesia. Empirical data from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) in 2023 reported over 2,500 cases of child-related behavioral deviations, including bullying, dishonesty, and disobedience, many of which occurred in school settings. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (MoECRT) has acknowledged that the character education movement, while well-intentioned, has not yet achieved the intended transformative impact. (Newman, 2020).

Moreover, a study by Reis-Andersson (2024) It was found that only 27% of primary school principals in Central Java implemented a leadership model that consciously integrated cultural values. Of those, only 8% were based on localized philosophies, such as Gusjigang. This statistic suggests a significant underutilization of cultural capital that could otherwise enhance the ethical environment of schools. With the increasing emphasis on Profil Pelajar Pancasila (Pancasila Student Profile) as Indonesia's model for ideal character formation, there is an urgent need to translate these aspirations into localized leadership practices that resonate with students' social and moral contexts.

To address these challenges, this study focuses on three main questions: (1) How are Gusjigang values conceptualized and internalized in the leadership practices of elementary school principals? (2) To what extent are these values reflected in school culture, decision-making, and interactions between teachers and students? Moreover, (3) How does Gusjigang-based leadership contribute to strengthening character education among elementary school students? Based on these questions, this study aims to examine in depth how principals understand and apply the Gusjigang philosophy in their daily leadership, analyze the mechanisms by which these local cultural values are internalized into the educational environment and practices, and evaluate the impact of a culture-based leadership approach on student character formation. Thus, this study not only contributes theoretically to the development of a leadership model responsive to local culture but also provides practical implications for the development of more contextual and meaningful character education in elementary schools.

Studies on educational leadership in Indonesia have generally focused on transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership models. Thomas et al. (2022) emphasize that effective school leadership improves student learning through strategic vision, teacher development, and community engagement. In the Indonesian context, studies such as those by Torrance et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of value-based leadership, yet often employ abstract or normative approaches. Research on character education has meanwhile

underscored the role of cultural relevance in successful implementation (Li et al., 2023). For example, Burgess et al. (2023) argue that enduring character formation requires alignment among curriculum, leadership, and the cultural environment. Indonesian scholars such as (echo this view, emphasizing that moral values in the curriculum should be aligned with students' lived experiences, including local traditions. Regarding the integration of local wisdom into education, several studies have examined Balinese Tri Hita Karana, Sundanese Silih Asah Asih Asuh, and Javanese unggah-ungguh as frameworks for educational values (Hardiansyah, 2022). However, research specifically focused on Gusjigang in the context of school leadership is still scarce. A few sociological studies have analyzed Gusjigang as an economic and religious ethos in the Kudus community, but these have not extended into leadership practices or education. Thus, there is an evident lack of empirical and theoretical exploration on how Gusjigang can inform school leadership and enhance character education.

The review above shows that while numerous studies acknowledge the importance of cultural values in education, few have operationalized these values into leadership models at the primary school level. Even fewer have examined indigenous philosophies, such as those of the Gusjigang, in the context of school leadership. There is a lack of empirical research that bridges the gap between cultural traditions and formal educational leadership, particularly within public school systems. Furthermore, most existing school leadership frameworks remain detached from local philosophical and moral traditions, limiting their cultural relevance and impact. This study addresses this critical gap by developing a culturally situated understanding of leadership rooted in Gusjigang values and evaluating its practical implications for character education.

This study contributes to educational leadership by proposing a culturally grounded model of leadership based on the Gusjigang philosophy—an area that remains underexplored in the literature. It expands the discourse on culturally responsive leadership by providing empirical data from an Indonesian cultural setting, thereby challenging the Western-centric bias in leadership studies. Furthermore, it offers a localized framework that aligns character education with communal values, thereby enhancing its relevance and effectiveness.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on Gusjigang and its methodological approach, which integrates ethnographic inquiry with leadership theory to capture the lived experiences of school principals. By illuminating how cultural values can shape leadership practices and educational outcomes, this study provides theoretical and practical insights for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers. It advances the growing body of research advocating for leadership models that are not only effective but also culturally resonant, ethically grounded, and socially transformative.

METODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative approach with a survey design to investigate the role of local cultural values, as represented by Gusjigang, in the leadership practices of school principals and their application in character education at the elementary school level. The quantitative approach was chosen because it enables researchers to measure perceptions objectively and in a standardized manner, allowing for statistical analysis and the identification of general patterns in the studied social phenomenon. A survey design was considered appropriate because it aligned with the research objectives, namely to obtain systematic and representative data on how principals and teachers internalize and implement Gusjigang values in the context of leadership and character education.

The sample in this study consisted of 15 elementary school principals and 85 teachers teaching at public elementary schools in Kudus Regency, Central Java. The sampling technique was random to avoid selection bias and increase the generalizability of the research results. This technique was chosen so that everyone in the population had an equal chance of being selected as a respondent.

Data were collected through a closed questionnaire comprising 30 statements, compiled based on indicators representing the main variables in the study, namely (1) Gusjigang value-based principal leadership, and (2) implementation of Gusjigang values in character education. The questionnaire was designed using a 4-point Likert scale (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree), which allows respondents to indicate their level of agreement in a measurable and structured manner.

Table 1. Research Questionnaire Instrument

| Measured Aspect | Indicator |
|--|--|
| School Principal Leadership Based on Gusjigang | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Commitment to religious values (Gus)- Strengthening literacy and reading culture (Ji)- Role modeling of work ethic and entrepreneurship (Gang)- Instilling religious values |
| Implementation in Character Education | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Developing literacy-oriented behavior- Shaping independence and resilience |

A reliability test was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha formula to assess the internal consistency of the instrument. The calculation results showed an alpha value of $\alpha = 0.892$, which falls in the very high reliability category; therefore, the instrument is considered reliable for primary data collection. The data were analyzed descriptively using quantitative techniques with percentages. Percentages were used to describe the distribution of respondents' answers to each

questionnaire item, which were then interpreted to understand the trends in Gusjigang-based school leadership practices and their influence on the implementation of character education. Using percentages facilitates data visualization and allows for precise and systematic interpretation of general trends. The results of this analysis served as the basis for drawing conclusions and providing recommendations based on empirical data.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings are based on responses from 15 primary school principals and 85 teachers in Kudus Regency, who completed a structured questionnaire comprising 30 items across six core indicators. Data were analyzed using percentage-based descriptive statistics to capture the general trends and levels of agreement among respondents. The analysis reveals varying degrees of integration of Gusjigang values into school leadership and character education practices, with some dimensions more strongly embedded in the school culture than others.

Table 2. Survey Results – Gusjigang-Based School Leadership

| Indicator | Mean Score (Max 4.00) | Percentage (%) | Category |
|---|-----------------------|----------------|-----------|
| Commitment to religious values (Gus) | 3.72 | 93.0% | Very High |
| Strengthening literacy and reading culture (Ji) | 3.45 | 86.3% | High |
| Work ethic and entrepreneurial modeling (Gang) | 3.38 | 84.5% | High |

The high scores on this indicator reflect that school principals in the Kudus region demonstrate strong leadership in religious and spiritual values. This aligns with Sergiovanni's (1992) theory of moral leadership, which posits that true leaders manage schools administratively and serve as guardians of moral values and norms. Within this framework, school principals act as moral agents, shaping school culture through exemplary behavior, spirituality, and the reinforcement of ethical values in everyday life. Furthermore, this concept intersects with the transformational leadership approach, particularly in the idealized influence dimension of (Li et al., 2023)In which leaders are seen as role models who can inspire followers through personal integrity and noble values. In the context of Gusjigang, the Gus dimension requires school principals to demonstrate moral integrity based on Islamic values, and data show that this has been firmly embedded in leadership practices. This correlation is reinforced by (Burgess et al., 2023)Leaders who prioritize moral vision will create a school climate that supports character learning and the formation of social ethics. Therefore, high scores in this dimension reflect personal religious devotion and active contributions to creating a spiritual and meaningful educational ecosystem.

The *Ji* dimension reflects the principal's role in promoting a literacy culture in the school environment. The high score (86.3%) indicates that the principal has initiated various literacy activities, including promoting reading habits, developing the library, and implementing Qur'anic literacy initiatives. This illustrates the application of the principle of instructional leadership, specifically in fostering a favorable learning environment. (Zhu et al., 2022). (Mincu, 2022) The theory of cultural capital is also relevant in this context. Literacy is a technical skill and a form of cultural capital that can increase social mobility and strengthen community identity. When principals instill a culture of literacy that is in harmony with local traditions, such as *Ji*, they improve students' academic abilities and transfer cultural values and identity.

However, literacy in the context of Gusjigang is not limited to conventional reading skills, but also includes aspects of critical awareness, which, in the view of (Oh et al., 2020)Conscientization is referred to as. Therefore, although the data show high scores, the literacy approach should continue to be developed towards critical literacy to produce reflective and transformative students.

The *Gang* dimension, which refers to the principal's exemplary role in building a work ethic and entrepreneurial spirit, scored high but lower than the other two. This indicates that although the principal has initiated work ethic practices and productive activities, integrating *Gang* values into the school culture is not yet optimal. According to (García-Álvarez et al., 2023)In his social learning theory, modeling is one of the most effective ways to shape behavior. In this context, principals should exemplify independence, hard work, innovation, and entrepreneurial spirit, which teachers and students internalize. A score of 84.5% indicates that this modeling is already happening, but has not been systematically integrated into the school curriculum or policies.

From the perspective of 21st-century leadership, as proposed by (Gruzina et al., 2020)Leadership in the 21st century needs to encourage innovation, creativity, and life skills. The *Gang* values align highly with these competencies: initiative, adaptability, and entrepreneurship. However, to make them a mainstay of school leadership, a supporting system is needed: teacher training, an entrepreneurship curriculum, and partnerships with the community. From a local-global perspective, the application of *Gang* values can also be seen as an effort to contextualize national character education in a local cultural format, as recommended by UNESCO (2015) in the framework of Global Citizenship Education—that is, developing global values through local contexts.

Overall, the three indicators show that the values of Gusjigang have been meaningfully internalized by school principals in Kudus, particularly in the religious (*Gus*) and literacy (*Ji*)

aspects, with *Gang* as the next development challenge. These results demonstrate that leadership grounded in local wisdom is both possible and practical in fostering school character and culture. Theories such as culturally responsive, moral, and instructional leadership provide a framework that strengthens the argument that *Gusjigang*-based leadership can be a contextual, valuable, and transformative alternative model in Indonesian primary education.

Table 3. Survey Results – Implementation in Character Education

| Indicator | Mean Score | Percentage | Category |
|---|------------|------------|-----------|
| Instilling religious values | 3.65 | 91.3% | Very High |
| Developing literacy-oriented behavior | 3.41 | 85.3% | High |
| Shaping independence and resilience in students | 3.27 | 81.8% | High |

The high score for this indicator reflects that religious values form the cornerstone of character education in primary schools in Kudus, a region deeply embedded in Islamic traditions. This aligns with (Green et al., 2020) Comprehensive framework of character education, particularly the domains of moral knowing and moral feeling, where schools are responsible for transferring knowledge about right and wrong and cultivating emotional attachment to moral principles. Implementing religious practices, ethical discussions, and spiritual routines in school life exemplifies what (Żywiołek et al., 2022) Described as the purposing function of school leadership—embedding shared values into the institutional culture. This orientation is further supported by Durkheim's theory of moral education, which suggests that moral behavior is most effectively developed through collective rituals and the internalization of values in social institutions, such as schools. In this case, religious values are not seen as abstract, but are lived daily through structured routines (e.g., prayers, Qur'an recitations, religious holidays), creating a cohesive moral climate. The strength of this domain suggests that the *Gus* aspect of the *Gusjigang* philosophy has been effectively translated into educational praxis.

This result indicates that efforts to instill literacy in character formation are perceived positively, though not as strongly as moral-religious values. Literacy in this context refers to the academic skills and habitual behaviors shaped by environmental and cultural reinforcement. This aligns with (Min et al., 2023), which posits that behavior is learned through observation, imitation, and reinforcement within a social context. When schools create literacy-rich environments—through reading corners, shared reading, and literacy celebrations—they shape academic outcomes and personal traits such as curiosity, discipline, and intellectual engagement.

Moreover, from Loyens et al.'s perspective on cultural capital, schools promoting literacy behaviors transmit valuable non-material assets that can empower students socially and

academically. The integration of *Ji* (as part of the *Gusjigang* value system) suggests a hybrid character model that fuses spiritual commitment with intellectual cultivation, reinforcing that reading is not just a skill but a lifelong virtue. However, the slightly lower score compared to religious values suggests the need for a more consistent and systematic integration of literacy within character-building frameworks—perhaps through more project-based learning, student-authored texts, or family literacy initiatives.

Although still categorized as "high," this indicator scored the lowest, suggesting that fostering *entrepreneurial character*—as reflected in the *Gang* component of *Gusjigang*—remains a challenge in many schools. Independence and resilience are core 21st-century competencies that align with frameworks such as (Harrison et al., 2020) *Seven Survival Skills*, which include initiative, adaptability, and critical thinking. The lower score may indicate that schools have not yet fully developed instructional models supporting autonomy and problem-solving in authentic contexts. This is supported by (Peterson, 2020) Experiential learning theory, which holds that independence and character are best developed through active engagement in real-world tasks, rather than passive instruction.

Furthermore, (Liew et al., 2022) Argue that character education must encompass both performance (such as resilience, perseverance, and self-discipline) and *moral character*. The current data suggest that while moral character (e.g., religiosity) is strong, performance character remains underdeveloped—perhaps due to structural limitations, traditional pedagogies, or lack of exposure to risk-taking and responsibility in learning tasks. The data also resonate with UNESCO's Global Citizenship Education (2015), which emphasizes empowerment and agency as goals of character formation. The absence of entrepreneurial, problem-solving learning may mean that students are not fully engaged as autonomous moral agents.

The findings reinforce that the implementation of *Gusjigang* values in character education is relatively strong in moral (religious) and cognitive (literacy) domains, but weaker in behavioral transformation (independence and resilience). This pattern reflects what (Jerdborg, 2022) Describe a common imbalance in character education programs: an overemphasis on the transmission of values without a corresponding emphasis on developing self-regulation, courage, and persistence.

From a policy and leadership standpoint, this suggests a need to design educational activities more explicitly that simulate real-life challenges, promote student agency, and encourage collaborative problem-solving, especially if the *Gang* aspect is to be authentically realized in character development. It also calls for greater alignment between character

education, instructional design, and leadership strategies, so that values such as independence and entrepreneurship are not treated as abstract ideals but practiced as lived school experiences.

The findings of this study carry significant social and ethical implications for the development of culturally grounded education systems. Socially, integrating *Gusjigang* values into school leadership and character education contributes to the preservation and revitalization of local wisdom in an increasingly globalized educational landscape. By reinforcing religious commitment, literacy culture, and work ethic, schools are shaping morally responsible individuals and fostering a cohesive community identity rooted in shared values. This cultural continuity can enhance social solidarity, intergenerational respect, and civic engagement among students from an early age. Ethically, the study highlights the importance of authenticity in educational leadership, where moral values are not imposed externally but emerge organically from the community's lived traditions. It also challenges school systems to move beyond normative or performative character education by ensuring that moral and entrepreneurial virtues are cultivated through real experiences, reflection, and consistent role modeling. Failure to do so may result in ethical superficiality, where values are stated but not embodied. Thus, this research advocates for an ethically conscious leadership model that aligns educational practices with the cultural and moral foundations of the society it serves.

While this study offers valuable insights into integrating *Gusjigang* values in school leadership and character education, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research relies primarily on quantitative survey data, which, although useful for identifying general trends, may not capture the nuanced processes, contextual challenges, and lived experiences underlying leadership practices. Second, the sample was limited to public primary schools in Kudus Regency, which may constrain the generalizability of findings to other regions or educational levels with different cultural dynamics. Third, the study focuses on the perceptions of principals and teachers, but does not include the voices of students, parents, or policy stakeholders whose perspectives could enrich the understanding of *Gusjigang*-based education in practice. Future research should consider employing mixed-methods approaches or qualitative case studies to explore the depth and complexity of culturally rooted leadership, including how values are interpreted, negotiated, and contested in school settings. Comparative studies across regions or cultural frameworks could also illuminate how local wisdom interacts with national or global educational mandates. Moreover, longitudinal studies may help assess the long-term impact of *Gusjigang*-inspired leadership on student character development and school culture. Expanding the inquiry to include student outcomes, parental involvement, and

curriculum integration will be critical in developing a comprehensive model of culturally responsive leadership rooted in indigenous values.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Gusjigang-based school leadership—particularly through the dimensions of religious commitment (Gus), literacy cultivation (Ji), and work ethic and entrepreneurship (Gang)—plays a significant role in shaping character education at the primary level. The findings reveal that religious values are deeply embedded and consistently modeled by school leaders, while literacy-oriented behaviors are well-promoted but require structural reinforcement. The entrepreneurial and resilience-building components, although present, remain underdeveloped, highlighting a gap between cultural ideals and educational practice. These results underscore the potential of culturally rooted leadership to serve as a transformative model for character education, especially when aligned with local wisdom and community values. The implications of this research are both practical and theoretical: school leaders and policymakers should actively integrate Indigenous values, such as those of the Gusjigang, into leadership training, curriculum design, and school culture to promote authentic, context-sensitive character formation. At the same time, the study contributes to the global discourse on culturally responsive leadership by offering an empirically grounded model that bridges tradition and innovation in education.

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