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THE LEADER WHO TOUCHES SOULS: CREATING A POSITIVE CULTURE AND MEANINGFUL LEARNING IN EARLYCHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Abstract
Leadership in Early Childhood Education environment play a key role in creating a positive, warm, and meaningful learning environment. The purpose of this study is to describe the role of leadership in shaping a school culture. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method. Data collection techniques include in-depth interviews with PAUD principals, teachers, and parents, observations, and documentation at PAUD in North Banjarmasin. The data obtained were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques, namely by identifying key patterns and themes that emerge from the qualitative data. This process includes data reduction, categorization, drawing tentative conclusions, and strengthening validity through triangulation of techniques and sources. With a conceptual approach supported by field studies, this article highlights that meaningful learning in PAUD can only be created if leaders are able to facilitate contextual learning experiences, based on children's interests, and humanize students. Implementation strategies such as teacher capacity building, family engagement, and character-based evaluation were also discussed. The results of this study indicate that leadership that touches the soul not only improves the quality of learning but also builds a strong, inclusive, and empathetic institutional culture. These findings can serve as a reference in developing a humanistic and transformative leadership model for early childhood education.
Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Leadership, Positive Culture, Meaningful Learning,

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (PAUD) is a fundamental stage in shaping a child's character, intelligence, and overall personality. This golden period of development demands an educational approach that encompasses not only academics but also emotional, social, and spiritual aspects (Grashinta et al., 2025).

In this context, the leaders of early childhood education institutions play a central role as guardians of institutional values and culture that are oriented towards children's needs. The PAUD leader is not just an administrative manager who manages school operations, but a central figure who determines the direction of the educational vision, fosters enthusiasm among educators, and creates an atmosphere that supports meaningful learning (Papalia et al., 2025). Leadership at this level should be present authentically and touch the human side of all elements of the school (Anwar, 2024) .

The concept of a "soul-touching leader" refers to a leader who is able to build deep relationships, practice empathy, demonstrate sincerity, and be an example of noble values (Permatasari & Frendika, 2022).

This figure not only manages but also inspires, listens, and fosters a collective spirit to create a harmonious and inclusive educational ecosystem. The positive culture built by such leaders will be reflected in teacher-child interactions, school-parent relationships, and the overall atmosphere of the institution (Bhoki et al., 2023).

This culture encourages acceptance of diversity, strengthening children's identities, and creating a sense of psychological safety that is very important in the learning process at an early age (Khair et al., 2024) .

Moreover, a leader who touches the soul is able to facilitate a learning process that is not limited to academic achievement alone. Instead, he or she encourages contextual learning, based on the child's interests, and integrated with actual and real life values, so that children learn not just to learn, but to become whole human beings. (Syafei et al., 2024).

In practice, this type of leader encourages teachers to continuously reflect on their pedagogical practices, provides spaces for collaboration, and fosters an attitude of lifelong learning (M. Yusuf, 2023) Such an early childhood education environment will be a fertile place for children and teachers to grow. Equally important, a leader who touches the soul also builds close relationships with parents. He or she involves families as equal partners in their children's education, creates a space for healthy dialogue, and engages the community in building a resilient learning ecosystem that is relevant to everyday life (Afia & Malik, 2024) .

In line with research by Afia & Malik (2024), which states that by presenting a meaningful leadership approach based on humanitarian values, PAUD can go beyond their formal function as childcare centers. They will become spaces of transformation that shape future generations who are empowered, caring, and possess strong character to face the challenges of the times.

This is reinforced by the research findings of Haiyan et al. (2021), which states that the success of School M in Shanghai is driven by a strong focus on educational fundamentals, continuous teacher training, and a collaborative culture.

Effective leadership is rooted in Confucian values, such as the role of leaders who resemble parents and the importance of building trust through example. While School M is not representative of all schools in Shanghai, these findings provide important insights into school leadership in the Chinese cultural context.

Several PAUD principals in North Banjarmasin have demonstrated leadership that touches the emotional aspects of children and parents. During Mother's Day celebrations, for example, children are invited to wash their mothers' feet as a sign of respect and affection, creating a meaningful moment and strengthening the emotional bond between children and parents. PAUDs in Banjarmasin have also begun adopting a mindful, meaningful and joyful learning approach. Through webinars and training, educators are encouraged to build a positive culture and effective communication within the PAUD environment, thus creating a fun and meaningful learning environment for children. Despite these positive developments, challenges such as teacher quality and financial management remain a concern. Some non-formal PAUD face difficulties maintaining their operations. However, some institutions have successfully overcome these challenges through superior leadership, maintaining accreditation, and achieving achievements at the regional and national levels (Liebertus & Hidayat, 2025).

Overall, soul-centered leadership is the primary foundation for building a positive culture and creating meaningful learning in early childhood education (PAUD). Leaders with empathy, values, and sincerity are able to create an educational ecosystem that not only educates cognitively but also fosters children's emotional and spiritual aspects in

a balanced manner. This leadership model is highly relevant to meet the demands of 21st-century education, which emphasizes a holistic, humanistic, and values-based approach. In the long term, this leadership will produce children who are not only intelligent but also strong-willed and meaningful to their peers.

Based on the problem description above, the author feels the need to conduct research on soul-touching leadership: establishing a positive culture and meaningful learning in early childhood education, which can ultimately improve the quality of a leader as desired. The focus of this research is to explore the role of leadership in establishing a positive educational climate and creating meaningful learning experiences for early childhood.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method to explore in depth the leadership practices of PAUD principals in forming a positive culture and creating meaningful learning. (Amani, 2023) . This approach was chosen because it can reveal the subjective meanings, values, and experiences of early childhood education leaders in a real-life context. The research focused on several early childhood education institutions in Banjarmasin City known for actively developing a pleasant learning environment and having visionary and inspiring principals.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with PAUD principals, teachers, and parents of students to obtain a holistic perspective on leadership styles, values adopted, and their impact on the learning process (Nurkholis, 2021). In addition, according to Yusuf & Qomariah (2023) Participatory observation was used to directly observe the interactions between the principal, educators, and children in daily activities within the school environment.

Asopwan (2019) in his research stated that documentation studies were also conducted to support field findings, including analysis of work plan documents, activity records, and children's learning portfolios.

The data obtained was analyzed using thematic analysis techniques, namely by identifying key patterns and themes that emerged from the qualitative data. This process included data reduction, categorization, drawing tentative conclusions, and strengthening validity through triangulation of techniques and sources (Mulyana et al., 2024).

Triangulation was conducted by comparing the result of interview, observation, and documentation, and verifying the findings through member checking with key informants. With this approach, the research is expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions to the development of a leadership model for early childhood education that touches the soul and has a real impact on the quality of early childhood education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation, three main findings were identified.

Leadership That Touches the Soul

A soul-stirring PAUD principal understands that young children learn most effectively through observation and imitation. In this regard, leaders serve as role models for religious behavior and noble morals. They consistently demonstrate discipline in worship, such as beginning activities with communal prayer, making morning remembrance a habit, and instilling the values of sincerity and

gratitude. This exemplary behavior is not only seen in formal activities but also in everyday attitudes such as patience, honesty, and fairness in decision-making. Leaders who model Islamic morals will influence the overall culture of the institution. Children, teachers, and parents will more easily adapt to the lived and tangible values within the school environment.

Soul-touching leadership is demonstrated through the PAUD principal's ability to understand and feel the emotional needs of teachers and parents. When a teacher experiences personal stress or difficulties in the learning process, the principal does not immediately judge or impose sanctions, but instead approaches with gentleness and seeks solutions together. This attitude fosters a sense of security and high trust among staff in the leader. For parents, an empathetic leader is not only present in formal forums but also willing to listen to complaints, offer advice, or even provide personal assistance in certain situations. The relationships built are not based solely on position, but also on humanity and compassion.

Soul-touching PAUD principals understand the importance of open, honest, and equal communication. In practice, they build two-way dialogue with teachers, children, and parents. Regular meetings are held not only to discuss programs but also as a reflective forum for sharing aspirations and solutions. Children are actively involved in expressing their opinions, even if simple, as a way of recognizing their voices. The relationships built are humanistic and based on mutual respect. Teachers are not afraid to offer suggestions to the principal, and parents feel heard in the collaborative parenting process. This type of communication strengthens the emotional bonds between school members and creates a healthy, collaborative, and warm ecosystem. It is believed that healthy educational relationships are built on mutual trust and affection.

Positive Culture Formed

A positive culture in early childhood education (PAUD) environments doesn't emerge spontaneously, but rather results from consistent and ongoing practices. One important practice is communal prayer before and after learning activities. This activity not only cultivates the habit of remembering God in all activities but also fosters spiritual awareness from an early age. Teachers and principals facilitate this habit in enjoyable ways, such as through prayer songs or stories about the importance of gratitude and prayer to God.

Furthermore, the habit of greeting each child every morning is an important part of creating a friendly and warm atmosphere. Every child who arrives is greeted with a smile, a greeting, and a light hug by the teacher. This psychologically fosters a sense of security, acceptance, and appreciation. Within the context of school culture, simple actions like these contribute significantly to creating a positive emotional climate. Children learn to imitate these behaviors, creating an atmosphere of courtesy and mutual respect.

Programs like "Blessed Friday" also foster a culture of sharing and caring. In these activities, children are encouraged to bring food to share with friends or neighbors, clean up the school grounds together, or participate in simple community outreach. Through these activities, values such as mutual cooperation, togetherness, and empathy are instilled in a tangible and enjoyable way. These activities also involve parents, who provide support through logistics, labor, and direct attendance at school.

Equally important is the active involvement of parents in school activities. Parents not only serve as providers of material needs but also as part of the learning community. Early childhood education principals create spaces for dialogue and participation, such as parenting classes, parent-teacher forums, and creative development activities with children. This involvement strengthens the relationship between home and school, builds a sense of ownership of the institution, and fosters healthy collaboration in educating children holistically.

Through consistent habits, warm interactions, and values instilled in everyday life, a positive school culture is formed. This culture creates an environment that supports children's growth not only intellectually, but also socially, emotionally, and spiritually. In the long term, this culture will serve as a solid foundation for developing resilient, empathetic, and moral characters in children.

Meaningful and Contextual Learning

Meaningful and contextual learning in early childhood education (PAUD) is an approach that places children at the center of learning activities and takes into account their social, cultural, and spiritual backgrounds. In several PAUD institutions in North Banjarmasin District, this approach is implemented through exploratory activities that are close to children's lives, so that children not only learn concepts but also experience, feel, and interpret the learning. One common example is a "mini market," where children role-play as sellers and buyers. This activity is not just play, but also a means of introducing mathematical concepts (counting), social communication (interaction), and the values of honesty and responsibility.

Furthermore, school gardens serve as highly effective living laboratories for introducing children to the environment, basic science, and the values of cooperation. Children are encouraged to plant, water, and care for plants together. Through these activities, they learn about the growth process, the importance of caring for God's creation, and the importance of working together in groups. These activities also foster patience and consistency, two crucial aspects of early childhood character development. This nature-based learning provides opportunities for children to experience firsthand, which aligns with the principles of experiential learning.

The use of Islamic stories in learning is also a highly effective medium for conveying moral and spiritual values. Teachers present stories of the Prophet, his companions, and other role models in the form of fairy tales, simple dramas, or visual images. Children not only hear the stories but are also engaged in discussions about the lessons learned, such as the importance of honesty, helping one another, or being patient. These values are then reinforced through real-life activities at school.

What makes this learning even more meaningful is the inclusion of moral values, responsibility, and tolerance in each learning theme. When studying the theme "Myself," children are introduced to the importance of maintaining personal hygiene and respecting their bodies as a trust from God. When discussing the theme "My Family," children learn about the roles of each family member and the importance of caring for one another. When exploring the theme "My Environment," children are introduced to the diversity of professions, ethnicities, and cultures through an

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approach that fosters respect and tolerance for differences.

Thus, meaningful and contextual learning in early childhood education (PAUD) focuses not only on achieving child development indicators but also on developing deep understanding, positive social attitudes, and strong character. Through real-life experiences, local culture, and spiritual values, children are guided to grow into cognitively intelligent and morally wise individuals. The implementation of PAUD leadership refers to the core values framework as shown in Figure 1, which includes empathy, meaningful learning, communication, habituation, and parental involvement.

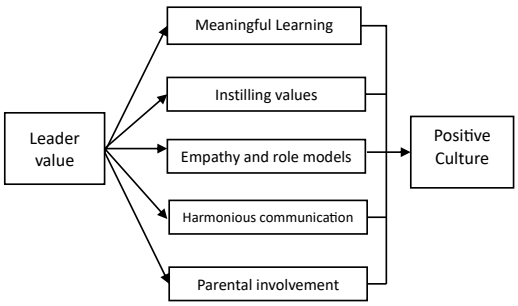

Figure 1. leadership model

DISCUSSION

This research confirms that the success of early childhood education institutions in fostering a positive culture and meaningful learning is largely determined by the quality of leadership exercised by the head of the institution. Specifically, the concept of "soul-affirming leadership" plays a central role in creating an educational environment that not only serves an instructional function but also fosters holistic human, spiritual, and social dimensions in children.

These findings are consistent with Sergiovanni's opinion, which states that effective educational leaders not only use structural power, but also moral influence and role models (Siahaan, 2018).

The principal of an early childhood education school in North Banjarmasin has demonstrated the practice of value -based leadership, demonstrated through exemplary worship, empathy for teachers and parents, and inclusive communication. Such leaders not only manage the school's operations but also enliven the spirit of education itself. This type of leadership reflects a servant leadership approach that emphasizes service first as the foundation of leadership. When the principal is able to understand the emotional state of the school community, address the spiritual needs of children and teachers, and actively participate in the learning dynamics, a sense of security and strong emotional attachment emerges within the educational community.

The positive culture that is formed is not merely a mechanical routine, but is reflective and highly valued. Practices such as communal prayer, greetings, and Friday Blessings are not merely traditions, but strategies for internalizing character values. This character habituation emphasizes the importance of repeating values in a meaningful context. This culture strengthens the connection between school members and creates a conducive atmosphere for children's psychosocial development. The presence of parents as equal partners in school activities is also a strength in shaping a positive culture. Their active involvement supports the creation of a collaborative and democratic learning ecosystem and strengthens the integration between home and school education. This expands the function of PAUD as a community space that fosters the values of togetherness and mutual cooperation.

School leds by a spiritually engaged principal demonstrate the distinctive characteristics of learning that is not solely academically oriented, but rather focuses on a holistic learning experience. This concept aligns with the holistic education

approach, which encompasses the intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, and physical dimensions of children. Locally culturally based learning (such as mini markets and school gardens) enriches children's experiences and makes them active participants in their environment. Activities such as role-playing, planting, and listening to Islamic stories not only enhance cognition but also foster values of responsibility, empathy, and tolerance. These activities explicitly demonstrate the application of the experiential learning approach, where children learn through direct experience and reflection. Teachers act not as information centers but as learning facilitators, in line with the educational paradigm. It is important to note that leaders play a crucial role in encouraging teachers to reflect on their teaching practices, creating space for innovation, and ensuring that each learning theme is integrated with life values. An ECE environment with this leadership style not only trains children to become active learners but also civilized citizens from an early age.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that soulful leadership plays a crucial role in creating a positive culture and meaningful learning in early childhood education institutions. Principals who implement leadership with an emotional, spiritual, and humanistic approach are able to foster a school climate that is safe, comfortable, and respectful of each individual. This leadership is evident not only in the formal policies implemented but also in consistent role modeling, personal communication, and empathy demonstrated in daily life. A positive culture in early childhood education (PAUD) is fostered through routines that support character building, emotional engagement between teachers and children, and open communication with parents. Meanwhile, meaningful learning is realized through contextual, enjoyable methods that encourage children's active involvement in exploring their surroundings. Principals who successfully fulfill this role are proven to inspire the entire school community, create synergy between teachers, students, and parents, and guide early childhood education institutions into holistic and inclusive places for growth and development.

As a recommendation, it is crucial for PAUD principals to develop humanistic and inspirational leadership to foster a positive school culture and meaningful learning. Specialized training, policy support, and close collaboration with teachers, parents, and the community are needed to create a more holistic and inclusive learning environment for children. Further research is also needed to broaden the understanding and impact of soul-touching leadership in the context of early childhood education.

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