

# Ethnopedagogical Leadership and Noble Character Formation: A Phenomenological Study in an Islamic Elementary School

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines ethnopedagogical leadership and its relationship with the cultivation of noble character at MI Tarbiyatul Akhlaq Wedoroanom. The study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation involving the principal and teachers. The findings indicate that ethnopedagogical leadership is implemented through three Javanese leadership principles: Ing Ngarsa Sung Tuladha, Ing Madya Mangun Karsa, and Tut Wuri Handayani. These principles are reflected in the principal's exemplary behavior, teacher participation in decision-making, motivation, communication, and support for professional development. The study also found that ethnopedagogical leadership is closely related to noble character cultivation through daily habituation, including greeting, handshaking, respecting teachers, discipline, and mutual care. The study concludes that ethnopedagogical leadership provides a culturally grounded leadership model that connects local wisdom, school culture, and character education. Future research should examine this model across multiple schools and cultural contexts.

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## INTRODUCTION

As stated in the Preamble of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, one of the fundamental objectives of the Indonesian state is to promote public welfare and educate the nation. These two objectives are closely interconnected because efforts to improve social welfare cannot be separated from the development of human resources through education. Education therefore occupies a central position in realizing national development goals. In this context, education is not merely concerned with the transmission of academic knowledge but also with the development of students' moral, social, cultural, and civic capacities. Contemporary educational research emphasizes that

learning becomes more meaningful when students' cultural backgrounds, community experiences, and existing knowledge are recognized as important resources in the educational process (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll et al., 1992).

The primary purpose of education is to develop holistic individuals who possess intellectual competence, self-control, social responsibility, and moral character. Character formation cannot be separated from the sociocultural environment in which students grow. Culturally relevant pedagogy emphasizes that educational practices should recognize students' cultural identities and connect learning experiences with their social and cultural realities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Similarly, research on culturally relevant pedagogy demonstrates that the integration of students' cultural experiences into educational practices can contribute to more meaningful learning and stronger relationships between schools, teachers, students, and communities (Morrison et al., 2008).

Within the Indonesian educational context, character education has increasingly been associated with the preservation and revitalization of local cultural values. Local wisdom represents a valuable sociocultural resource because it contains norms, traditions, knowledge, and moral principles that have been transmitted across generations. When incorporated into educational practices, local wisdom can function not only as cultural heritage but also as a pedagogical resource for developing students' character and cultural identity. A recent study published in Heliyon demonstrates that ethnopedagogy can strengthen children's awareness of local culture while supporting character development through the integration of local wisdom into educational activities (Sakti et al., 2026).

Ethnopedagogy is particularly relevant because it places culture at the center of the educational process. Rather than treating culture as supplementary material, ethnopedagogy positions local knowledge, traditions, values, and practices as meaningful sources for teaching and learning. In this sense, education becomes a process of cultural transmission, cultural interpretation, and cultural reproduction. The use of local cultural resources may also strengthen students' sense of belonging and appreciation of cultural diversity. This argument is consistent with culturally relevant pedagogy, which emphasizes the importance of connecting classroom practices with learners' cultural experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Morrison et al., 2008).

The school therefore functions not merely as an institution for academic instruction but also as a cultural space in which values are reproduced, negotiated, and transformed. School leaders have an important role in creating an environment that recognizes and accommodates students' cultural backgrounds. Research on culturally responsive school leadership shows that leadership should extend beyond administrative responsibilities to include critical self-awareness, community engagement, advocacy, inclusion, and the development of culturally responsive school environments (Khalifa et al., 2016). In this context, ethnopedagogical leadership can be understood as an approach that connects educational leadership with local cultural values. Such leadership does not simply preserve traditional practices but seeks to interpret and transform cultural values into educational practices that remain relevant to contemporary challenges. School leaders are expected to understand the cultural characteristics of their communities and translate these characteristics into policies, school culture, teacher practices, and student activities. Culturally responsive leadership research similarly emphasizes that school principals need to understand the cultural and social contexts of their schools and establish meaningful relationships with students, families, and communities (Viloria, 2017; Khalifa et al., 2016).

The integration of local wisdom into education is also important in strengthening relationships between schools and communities. Local knowledge is often embedded in families, community practices, traditional activities, language, arts, rituals, and everyday social interactions. Consequently, schools can become important spaces for connecting formal education with community knowledge. The concept of funds of knowledge similarly demonstrates that knowledge embedded within households and communities can become an important educational resource when teachers establish

meaningful connections between students' home experiences and classroom learning (Moll et al., 1992). The importance of culturally responsive leadership becomes even more apparent in multicultural educational environments. School leaders must be capable of responding to cultural diversity while maintaining a common educational vision. Research on culturally responsive leadership indicates that effective leadership requires attention to school culture, teacher development, community advocacy, and the educational needs of diverse student populations (Khalifa et al., 2016). Research on school leadership in multicultural contexts also indicates that school leaders require adequate cultural knowledge and competencies to support integration and harmony within diverse school communities.

In the context of MI Tarbiyatul Akhlaq Wedoroanom, preliminary observations indicate a shift from an instructional leadership orientation toward leadership practices that increasingly recognize local cultural values. This can be observed in the principal's emphasis on role modeling, moral conduct, environmental responsibility, and the incorporation of culturally meaningful values into everyday school practices. Such practices are consistent with the principles of culturally responsive leadership, in which school leaders are expected to develop school environments that are responsive to students' cultural and social contexts (Khalifa et al., 2016; Vilorio, 2017). The integration of local wisdom into character education has also been supported by recent empirical research in Indonesia. Sakti et al. (2026), for example, found that ethnopedagogy can strengthen children's awareness of local culture, support character development, and encourage community participation in education. More recent research likewise indicates that ethnopedagogy can contribute to the revitalization of local wisdom within formal education and strengthen cultural identity and character formation. Therefore, the present study focuses on ethnopedagogical leadership in the cultivation of noble character at MI Tarbiyatul Akhlaq Wedoroanom. The study specifically examines how school leadership incorporates local wisdom into leadership practices, school culture, and character education. It also investigates how teachers and students experience and participate in these practices and how ethnopedagogical leadership contributes to the development of students' moral and cultural character.

## METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research method with a phenomenological approach. Qualitative research is appropriate for exploring and understanding how individuals interpret and experience a particular phenomenon within its natural social context. Rather than focusing on numerical measurement, qualitative inquiry seeks to develop an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, meanings, perspectives, and social interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Aspers & Corte, 2019). In this study, the phenomenological approach was employed to explore the lived experiences and meanings associated with ethnopedagogical leadership and the cultivation of noble character at MI Tarbiyatul Akhlaq Wedoroanom. The research was conducted through field research, enabling the researchers to examine the phenomenon directly within its natural educational setting. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant and non-participant observations, documentation, and other relevant techniques. These methods were used to obtain comprehensive information concerning the practices of ethnopedagogical leadership, interactions among school members, the implementation of local cultural values, and the process of cultivating students' noble character. The combination of different data sources also enabled the researchers to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and to strengthen the credibility of the findings through data triangulation.

The participants were selected purposively based on their relevance to the research focus and their direct involvement in the phenomenon being investigated. The research focused particularly on the school principal, teachers, and other relevant members of the school community who were considered capable of providing information regarding the implementation of ethnopedagogical leadership and

character education. In phenomenological research, participants are selected because they have direct experience of the phenomenon and are therefore able to provide rich descriptions of their lived experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019). The collected data were documented systematically and analyzed through an iterative process involving data organization, coding, categorization, interpretation, and the identification of themes. The analysis was directed toward identifying meanings and patterns emerging from participants' experiences rather than merely describing observable events. The phenomenological orientation enabled the researchers to move from individual accounts toward an interpretation of the essential meaning of ethnopedagogical leadership in the cultivation of noble character.

The primary objective of this study was therefore to explore and reveal the empirical realities of ethnopedagogical leadership and its relationship with the cultivation of noble character at MI Tarbiyatul Akhlaq Wedoroanom. The study sought to produce a systematic, comprehensive, and contextualized account of how local cultural values are interpreted and incorporated into educational leadership and character-building practices. Through this approach, the study was expected to generate new insights, conceptual understandings, and potentially transferable propositions concerning the relationship between culturally grounded leadership and character education. Furthermore, the qualitative phenomenological approach allowed the researchers to develop an in-depth understanding of the research setting and establish meaningful interactions with participants. Such engagement is essential because the meanings attached to leadership, local wisdom, and character formation are socially and culturally constructed. Accordingly, the research process emphasized participants' perspectives and experiences while maintaining sensitivity to the cultural context in which the phenomenon occurred (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Neubauer et al., 2019).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study address two main research questions: (1) how ethnopedagogical leadership is implemented at MI Tarbiyatul Akhlaq Wedoroanom, and (2) how ethnopedagogical leadership is related to the cultivation of noble character values among students.

### **Ethnopedagogical Leadership at MI Tarbiyatul Akhlaq Wedoroanom**

The findings indicate that ethnopedagogical leadership at MI Tarbiyatul Akhlaq Wedoroanom is reflected in three leadership principles: Ing Ngarsa Sung Tuladha, Ing Madya Mangun Karsa, and Tut Wuri Handayani. These three principles are manifested through role modeling, participation and encouragement, motivation, communication, and support for teachers and students.

### **Ing Ngarsa Sung Tuladha: Leadership through Role Modeling**

The first dimension of ethnopedagogical leadership is Ing Ngarsa Sung Tuladha, which emphasizes leadership through exemplary behavior. The findings show that the principal consistently demonstrates discipline through personal example, particularly in terms of punctuality.

One teacher, Nailil Marom, explained:

"The principal usually arrives earlier, so sometimes we feel uncomfortable if we arrive late."

(Nailil Marom, interview, January 17, 2026)

A similar statement was given by Mufarrohah AS, who explained that discipline must begin with the leader. According to her:

"If we want the students not to arrive late, the teachers have to come earlier. If we want the teachers to come earlier, the principal has to arrive before the teachers. So far, except when there is an urgent matter, the principal usually arrives before the teachers."

(Mufarrohah AS, interview, January 17, 2026)

Nur Muaffah MR also emphasized the importance of the principal's example:

"When we want the students to be disciplined and arrive on time, the principal has to come earlier, and the teachers have to follow. This is one example. So far, the principal has always arrived earlier, so we feel somewhat embarrassed if we arrive late, unless there is an unavoidable reason."

(Nur Muaffah MR, interview, January 18, 2026)

The interviews indicate that punctuality is not merely communicated as a formal rule but is demonstrated directly by the principal. The observation conducted from January 17–19, 2026, also indicated that exemplary behavior was reflected in the maintenance of the school environment, including cleanliness throughout the learning activities.

### **Ing Madya Mangun Karsa: Leadership through Participation and Encouragement**

The second dimension is Ing Madya Mangun Karsa, which refers to leadership from within the group by encouraging enthusiasm and participation. At MI Tarbiyatul Akhlaq Wedoroanom, this principle is reflected in the principal's efforts to involve teachers in developing school programs and policies. The principal explained that the school's development plan was prepared collaboratively with the teachers. The plan was initially formulated at the beginning of the leadership period and subsequently adjusted at the beginning of each academic year based on an evaluation of the previous year's activities. The process was conducted through deliberation, in which participants were given equal opportunities to express their views.

"The school development plan is prepared together with the teachers at the beginning of the leadership period. After that, adjustments are made at the beginning of each year based on the evaluation of the previous year's activities. The development plan is discussed through deliberation. Everyone involved has the same right to express their ideas, and we prioritize consensus so that no one feels uncomfortable with the decisions that have been agreed upon."

(Muhtashor, interview, January 17, 2026)

Arif Wahyudi explained that teachers were also involved in discussing new programs:

"In the second year, the existing programs were socialized through meetings to gather input from the teachers. The teachers were given the opportunity to provide criticism and suggestions regarding the programs that would be implemented."

(Arif Wahyudi, interview, January 18, 2026)

Nur Muaffah MR similarly stated:

"In the second year and the following years, there was always a program socialization meeting". Here, the teachers had equal rights to express their opinions openly."

(Nur Muaffah MR, interview, January 18, 2026)

Nailil Marom further explained:

"In the second year, new programs began to emerge. These new programs were discussed first. After reaching an agreement, they were implemented."

(Nailil Marom, interview, January 17, 2026)

Mufarrohah AS also confirmed that program implementation followed a process of consultation:

"At the beginning of the academic year, the principal always socializes the programs with the teachers first. If the teachers agree, the program is implemented. If they do not agree, we identify the shortcomings and make improvements."

(Mufarrohah AS, interview, January 17, 2026)

The findings also show that the principal encouraged teachers through guidance, problem-solving, appreciation, and open communication. The principal stated:

"Whenever there is a need, we provide support. If we find problems, we discuss them with the person concerned and look for a solution together. Guidance is necessary because we need to monitor the institution every day. If this is not done, the programs that have been prepared will not run optimally. Cooperation is also absolutely necessary. We also open the door widely to criticism and suggestions. The purpose is to create an open atmosphere in the institution, so that there is no dissatisfaction expressed behind people's backs and solidarity can be maintained."

(Muhtashor, interview, January 17, 2026)

Encouragement was also provided to students through recognition of their achievements. Alifatur R. described one example:

"Several years ago, my child won an award in a student achievement competition. In addition to receiving a trophy, at the end of the year my child was taken on a recreational trip and was given pocket money."

(Alifatur R., interview, January 19, 2026)

### **Tut Wuri Handayani: Motivation, Support, and Communication**

The third dimension is Tut Wuri Handayani, which emphasizes providing encouragement and support from behind. At MI Tarbiyatul Akhlaq Wedoroanom, this principle is reflected in the principal's efforts to motivate teachers, provide facilities, support professional development, and maintain communication.

Regarding teacher development, the principal stated:

"We have never restricted teachers from developing their abilities. In fact, we provide facilities and convenience for teachers who want to improve their abilities. We also try to maximize appreciation for their achievements according to the institution's capacity. The purpose is to motivate everyone to become better."

(Muhtashor, interview, January 17, 2026)

Nailil Marom explained that motivation was provided both collectively and individually:

"The principal always encourages awareness and the willingness to continue improving ourselves, especially now that competition is increasingly intense. If we do not perform optimally, we will fall behind others. The principal provides motivation not only during meetings but also personally, by paying attention to the teachers' needs."

(Nailil Marom, interview, January 17, 2026)

Mufarrohah AS explained that the principal's support included the provision of facilities:

"Usually, when motivating us, the principal pays attention to the teachers' needs. As long as it is for quality improvement, the required facilities will be provided."

(Mufarrohah AS, interview, January 18, 2026)

Nur Muaffah MR similarly stated:

"Efforts to encourage and motivate teachers to perform their duties optimally can be made by paying attention to their needs, including facilities and infrastructure, as well as personal needs."

(Nur Muaffah MR, interview, January 18, 2026)

Arif Wahyudi added:

"Teachers can perform more optimally when their facility needs are fulfilled. If the facilities are not available, how can they perform their duties optimally? So far, the available facilities are sufficient. If there is an additional need, the principal is ready to provide it."

(Arif Wahyudi, interview, January 18, 2026)

The principal's support was also reflected in the development of learning materials and teaching resources. The principal explained:

"The development of learning tools is always carried out before the new academic year begins. In addition to emphasizing that preparing learning tools is a teacher's obligation, we also build

awareness that by preparing these tools, teachers are making an effort to improve the quality of their own teaching.”

(Muhtashor, interview, January 17, 2026)

The facilities provided included reference materials, electronic equipment, and consumable materials needed to prepare learning resources. The school also organized regular professional development activities. The principal explained:

“Regular professional development has become a mandatory program. The activities vary. For example, the monthly KKG activity is conducted regularly. Annual activities include training on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Other training related to madrasah administration has also become part of our annual agenda.”

(Muhtashor, interview, January 17, 2026)

Communication was another important element of Tut Wuri Handayani. Arif Wahyudi explained that the principal used socialization as a strategy for communicating school programs:

“The first strategy used by the principal to achieve the objectives is to socialize the program with the teachers. After evaluating its weaknesses, the program is then socialized with the parents. In this way, when parents have questions, the teachers can answer them.”

(Arif Wahyudi, interview, January 18, 2026)

Nur Muaffah MR added:

“The teachers are given an explanation first. This is important because if the teachers do not understand the program, how can they answer questions from parents? Therefore, the principal conducts socialization twice: first with the teachers and then with the parents. The students receive the explanation from their respective classroom teachers.”

(Nur Muaffah MR, interview, January 18, 2026)

Communication with parents was also identified as part of the principal's leadership practice. Agus Hariadi stated:

“The principal is easy to meet when someone needs information.”

(Agus Hariadi, interview, January 19, 2026)

However, one parent identified a limitation in communication through electronic media. Alifatur R. stated:

“The response is sometimes rather slow when I contact him through WhatsApp, but when I communicate directly at the office, the response is usually good. I hope the response can be faster when information is needed through WhatsApp, especially because we cannot always make time to come to the office.”

(Alifatur R., interview, January 19, 2026)

The findings also show that communication was used to address student-related problems. Mufarrohah AS explained:

“If the problem occurs in the classroom, it is usually handled by the classroom teacher. If the classroom teacher or the teacher on duty cannot handle it, the student is called to the office, sometimes accompanied by the classroom teacher.”

(Mufarrohah AS, interview, January 17, 2026)

Arif Wahyudi similarly stated:

“If the classroom teacher cannot handle the problem, the student is called to the office. If the problem is serious, the student has to be accompanied by the classroom teacher so that an explanation can be given together in the principal's office.”

(Arif Wahyudi, interview, January 18, 2026)

### **The Relationship between Ethnopedagogical Leadership and the Cultivation of Noble Character**

The findings further indicate that the three dimensions of ethnopedagogical leadership-role modeling, attention, and motivation-are reflected in the cultivation of noble character among students. The cultivation of character is primarily implemented through daily habituation, direct examples, greetings, handshaking, mutual respect, and caring relationships among members of the madrasah community.

The principal explained:

“We cultivate noble character by providing examples, such as getting students used to saying greetings before entering a room, shaking hands with teachers when first entering the office and before leaving the madrasah, including attitudes of mutual respect and affection among members of the madrasah community.”

(Muhtashor, interview, January 17, 2026)

Arif Wahyudi emphasized the importance of direct modeling:

“Respect for teachers is practiced here through shaking hands before entering a room. When meeting teachers, students are accustomed to saying greetings, and this must be demonstrated through example.”

(Arif Wahyudi, interview, January 18, 2026)

Mufarrohah AS explained that these practices had become part of the school's routine:

“The cultivation of noble character is carried out through habituation programs, for example, the culture of shaking hands. This is done routinely every morning after the pledge. Another effort is the SKUA program (Standar Kecakapan Ubudiyah dan Akhlakul Karimah), which has been implemented for the past two years.”

(Mufarrohah AS, interview, January 17, 2026)

The observations conducted from January 17–19, 2026, showed that greetings and handshaking had become part of the students' daily activities. When students displayed inappropriate behavior, teachers and the principal reminded them and demonstrated the appropriate behavior. The same pattern was also observed among teachers, particularly when entering and leaving the office, where teachers greeted and shook hands with one another.

Overall, the findings show that the cultivation of noble character at MI Tarbiyatul Akhlaq Wedoroanom is implemented through repeated daily practices and direct examples provided by the principal and teachers. The interview data indicate that the principal's leadership is manifested not only through formal instructions but also through everyday behavior, teacher involvement, motivation, communication, provision of facilities, and habituation of positive behavior within the madrasah environment.

## **Discussion**

### **Ethnopedagogical Leadership as a Culture-Based Leadership Practice**

The findings of this study demonstrate that ethnopedagogical leadership at MI Tarbiyatul Akhlaq Wedoroanom is practiced through three leadership principles: *Ing Ngarsa Sung Tuladha*, *Ing Madya Mangun Karsa*, and *Tut Wuri Handayani*. These principles are not merely philosophical concepts but are manifested in the daily practices of the principal through role modeling, teacher participation, motivation, communication, and support for the development of the school community. This finding indicates that ethnopedagogical leadership is closely connected to the ability of school leaders to translate cultural values into everyday leadership practices. The finding regarding *Ing Ngarsa Sung Tuladha* shows that the principal's personal example becomes an important mechanism for establishing discipline and ethical behavior. The principal's practice of arriving at school earlier than teachers demonstrates that discipline is communicated through behavior rather than merely through formal

instructions. This finding is consistent with recent studies emphasizing that culturally grounded educational practices become more meaningful when cultural values are embodied in everyday behavior. Sakti et al. (2024), for example, found that ethnopedagogy strengthens character development when local cultural values are integrated into daily educational practices rather than treated as isolated instructional content. Similarly, Ramadani and Fitriisa (2023) demonstrated that character values such as religiosity, honesty, discipline, creativity, and social care can be cultivated through educational practices rooted in local traditions.

The present finding also extends the understanding of ethnopedagogy from the classroom to the domain of school leadership. While much of the existing literature discusses ethnopedagogy as a pedagogical approach, the findings of this study indicate that cultural values can also function as a leadership framework. The principal does not simply instruct teachers and students to behave according to particular values; instead, the principal becomes the first actor to demonstrate those values. This pattern is particularly relevant to the Javanese principle *Ing Ngarsa Sung Tuladha*, in which leadership begins with exemplary conduct. Recent research on culturally responsive school leadership similarly emphasizes that effective leaders develop culturally responsive practices through their own habits, relationships, and interactions within the school community. Vedder et al. (2026), based on interviews with award-winning principals, identified recurring leadership practices associated with culturally responsive leadership, including reflective practice, relationship building, responsiveness to community contexts, and attention to the experiences of members of the school community.

### **Participatory Leadership and the Principle of *Ing Madya Mangun Karsa***

The findings concerning *Ing Madya Mangun Karsa* indicate that ethnopedagogical leadership is also characterized by participation and collective decision-making. Teachers at MI Tarbiyatul Akhlaq Wedoroanom are involved in the formulation of school programs through meetings, discussion, criticism, suggestions, and consensus. This practice demonstrates that leadership is not exclusively hierarchical. Instead, the principal creates opportunities for teachers to participate in decisions affecting the development of the madrasah. This finding corresponds with research emphasizing the importance of collective and community-grounded leadership in culturally responsive educational environments. A recent analysis of culturally responsive leadership argues that meaningful cultural responsiveness requires a collective effort involving principals, teachers, students, families, and community members rather than leadership being concentrated solely at the administrative level. Such leadership combines top-down institutional direction with bottom-up participation from the school community.

The participatory pattern identified in this study is also consistent with findings from research on local wisdom-based education. Nurjannah and Chandra reported that integrating local wisdom into school culture requires clear institutional direction, teacher collaboration, and active engagement of stakeholders. Their findings indicate that the principal's managerial capacity is important in translating cultural values into curricular and extracurricular practices and in connecting school programs with the wider community. The present study similarly demonstrates that teachers are not positioned merely as program implementers; they are involved in discussing, evaluating, and refining school programs before implementation. This participatory practice is important because local wisdom cannot be effectively institutionalized through administrative instructions alone. Local values acquire meaning when members of the school community participate in interpreting and practicing them. This is evident in the present study through the process of deliberation and consensus (*musyawarah* and *mufakat*) used in developing school programs. The practice demonstrates that the cultural principle of collective agreement becomes part of the leadership process itself.

### **Tut Wuri Handayani: Motivation, Support, and Teacher Development**

The third dimension, Tut Wuri Handayani, is reflected in the principal's efforts to provide motivation, facilities, professional development, and personal support for teachers. The findings show that teachers are encouraged to improve their competencies, and the principal attempts to provide facilities according to institutional capacity. Professional development is also supported through regular teacher meetings, training, and other capacity-building activities. This finding corresponds with recent research on culturally responsive leadership, which emphasizes that school leaders should create organizational conditions that enable teachers to develop professionally and respond effectively to the cultural and social contexts of their students. Research involving religious schools in Malaysia, for example, found a positive relationship between culturally responsive leadership practices and teachers' self-efficacy. The findings suggest that leadership practices that recognize the needs and contexts of teachers can strengthen teachers' confidence in performing their professional responsibilities.

The present findings further suggest that teacher support is not limited to emotional encouragement but includes tangible institutional support. The provision of learning resources, electronic equipment, reference materials, training opportunities, and opportunities for professional development demonstrates that Tut Wuri Handayani operates through both interpersonal and organizational mechanisms. In this context, the cultural principle becomes a practical leadership strategy for strengthening teacher capacity. The importance of teacher involvement is also evident in recent research on local wisdom-based character education. Azhan et al. (2026), using a phenomenological approach at the primary-school level, found that teachers have developmental roles in implementing local wisdom-based character education across different learning phases. Their study emphasizes that teachers translate local cultural values into pedagogical practices and daily interactions with students. This finding strengthens the interpretation of the present study that the principal's role is not to replace teachers' pedagogical functions but to create an institutional environment that enables teachers to implement culturally grounded education effectively.

### **Communication as a Mechanism of Ethnopedagogical Leadership**

Communication emerges as another important finding in this study. The principal communicates school programs first to teachers and subsequently to parents, while teachers communicate the programs to students. This sequential communication pattern indicates that the principal recognizes the importance of shared understanding before a program is implemented. This finding is consistent with the principle that culturally responsive leadership depends on relationships and communication across the school community. Recent research on culturally responsive principals shows that leadership practices are closely connected to understanding the social and cultural contexts of students and families. Vilorio et al. (2025), for example, found that culturally responsive principals use contextual understanding and data-informed decision-making to address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. The findings also reveal a minor limitation in the school's communication system: communication through WhatsApp was perceived by one parent as sometimes slower than direct communication. Although this issue does not fundamentally undermine the principal's communication practice, it indicates that ethnopedagogical leadership in contemporary schools must also respond to changes in communication technology. Cultural responsiveness therefore needs to be combined with accessibility and responsiveness in digital communication.

### **Ethnopedagogical Leadership and the Cultivation of Noble Character**

One of the most significant findings of this study concerns the relationship between ethnopedagogical leadership and the cultivation of noble character. The results show that character formation at MI Tarbiyatul Akhlaq Wedoroanom is implemented through habituation, role modeling,

greetings, handshaking, respect for teachers, mutual affection, and daily interaction. These practices demonstrate that noble character is cultivated through repeated social practices rather than through formal instruction alone. This finding is strongly supported by recent research on local wisdom-based character education. Sakti et al. (2024) found that ethnopedagogy can revitalize local wisdom within character education and strengthen children's cultural awareness and character development. Their study also emphasized the importance of involving the school community in character education. Similarly, Mansur and Sholeh (2024) found that local wisdom can provide an important foundation for character education in Islamic elementary schools, particularly through educators' involvement in transmitting cultural and moral values.

The present finding concerning greetings and handshaking also corresponds with research demonstrating that local wisdom can be transformed into concrete character-building practices. Jayanti and Wulandari (2024), in their study of Hasthalaku-based character education, found that local cultural values can be implemented through systematic school practices and daily interactions. Their research reinforces the idea that character education becomes more meaningful when values are transformed into observable habits within the school environment. Similarly, research on local wisdom-based stories, traditional games, and cultural practices demonstrates that contextual cultural resources can contribute to children's character development. Miranda et al. (2025) found that local-wisdom-based children's stories can provide contextual learning experiences that support moral and character development. Astuti and Apriliani (2025) likewise reported that local-wisdom-based traditional games can be used as a strategy for strengthening character among elementary-school students. These findings support the present study's observation that character formation occurs through repeated cultural practices embedded in the everyday life of the school.

### **Local Wisdom, Religious Values, and Noble Character**

The findings also indicate that local cultural practices at MI Tarbiyatul Akhlaq Wedoroanom are closely connected to religious and moral values. Practices such as greeting, handshaking, respecting teachers, showing affection, and maintaining respectful relationships are not treated merely as cultural traditions but as part of the cultivation of *akhlaq mulia*. This integration is particularly significant in an Islamic elementary school because cultural practices are interpreted within a religious educational framework. Research on local wisdom-based Islamic education supports this relationship. Firmansyah et al. (2023) found that local wisdom can be integrated into Islamic religious education to strengthen character values. Their research showed that cultural values can be interpreted as educational resources for developing broader character orientations. Likewise, Alhamuddin et al. (2022) demonstrated that Minangkabau local wisdom contains values that can be developed as a basis for character education within an Islamic educational context.

The findings of Ramdan and Muzakar (2022) also indicate that local wisdom contains principles that can function as sources of character education. Their study of Sasak local wisdom identified cultural principles that contribute to children's character formation through family and community practices. These studies indicate that local wisdom does not merely preserve cultural identity but can also serve as a moral resource for education. In the context of the present study, this relationship is visible through the institutionalization of daily practices such as *salam* and *salim*, respect for teachers, and the SKUA program. These practices demonstrate an intersection between local social etiquette, religious values, and school culture. Consequently, ethnopedagogical leadership at MI Tarbiyatul Akhlaq Wedoroanom operates not only as a cultural leadership model but also as a mechanism for connecting local cultural practices with Islamic moral education.

### The Role of Habituation in Character Formation

Another important finding is that character cultivation occurs through habituation. The repeated practice of greeting, shaking hands, respecting teachers, and maintaining appropriate behavior creates a routine through which students encounter moral values in their everyday school experiences. The findings therefore suggest that character education is embedded within the institutional culture rather than being limited to a particular subject or program. Recent studies provide similar evidence. Hapsari and Sakti (2026) found that character education through local-wisdom-based habituation is not merely a routine activity but involves the synthesis of daily behavioral ethics and Javanese philosophical values. Their findings indicate that values such as politeness, discipline, and responsibility can be internalized through systematic habituation based on local wisdom.

Rohyadi et al. (2024) likewise reported that ethnopedagogical approaches can support the development of religious, nationalist, cooperative, integrity-based, and independent character among elementary-school students. Meanwhile, research on Riau Malay local wisdom found that character education integrated into local cultural learning contributed to religious, honest, disciplined, socially caring, responsible, environmentally conscious, independent, and respectful behavior. These findings reinforce the conclusion that the effectiveness of ethnopedagogical character education depends on the consistency with which values are practiced in the school environment. The present study contributes to this body of research by demonstrating that the consistency of such habituation is closely related to the leadership behavior of the principal. In other words, habituation is strengthened when school leaders and teachers themselves model the values expected from students.

### CONCLUSION

This study concludes that ethnopedagogical leadership at MI Tarbiyatul Akhlaq Wedoroanom is implemented through three principles: Ing Ngarsa Sung Tuladha, Ing Madya Mangun Karsa, and Tut Wuri Handayani. These principles are reflected in the principal's exemplary behavior, teacher involvement in decision-making, motivation, communication, and support for teacher development. Ethnopedagogical leadership is also closely related to the cultivation of noble character through daily habituation, including greeting, shaking hands with teachers, respecting others, maintaining discipline, and demonstrating appropriate behavior.

Theoretically, this study shows that ethnopedagogy can be understood not only as a learning approach but also as a culturally grounded leadership practice that connects local cultural values with character education. However, this study is limited to a qualitative phenomenological study at one madrasah, with data primarily obtained through interviews and observations, so the findings cannot be generalized to all Islamic elementary schools. Future research should involve multiple schools and participants and consider comparative, longitudinal, or mixed-method approaches to examine more deeply how ethnopedagogical leadership influences the development of students' noble character in different educational and cultural contexts.

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