The Principal's Strategy in Improving Student Character in the Junior High School of Situraja District

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Abstract: This research is motivated by the declining character of students in junior high school. This study aims to analyze and describe the principal's strategy in improving student character in junior high schools in Situraja District. Using a qualitative approach with descriptive method. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation studies. The results showed that the principal's strategy in improving student character includes: Development of religious habituation programs and positive school culture, Strengthening cooperation with parents and communities, Implementation of integrated character mentoring programs, and Optimization of character values-based extracurricular activities. These programs have proven effective in improving student character. The conclusion of this study reveals that the success of student character building is highly dependent on the principal's visionary leadership and the consistency of program implementation. The implications of this study emphasize the importance of developing principals' competencies in designing contextual and sustainable character-building programs, as well as the importance of building a character education ecosystem that involves all education stakeholders.

Abstrak: *Penelitian ini dilatarbelakangi oleh menurunnya karakter siswa di sekolah menengah pertama. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis dan mendeskripsikan strategi kepala sekolah dalam meningkatkan karakter siswa di SMP se-Kecamatan Situraja. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode deskriptif. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan studi dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa strategi kepala sekolah dalam meningkatkan karakter siswa meliputi: Pengembangan program pembiasaan religius dan budaya sekolah positif, Penguatan kerjasama dengan orangtua dan masyarakat, Implementasi program mentoring karakter terintegrasi, dan Optimalisasi kegiatan ekstrakurikuler berbasis nilai-nilai karakter. Program-program tersebut terbukti efektif dalam meningkatkan karakter siswa. Kesimpulan penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa keberhasilan pembentukan karakter siswa sangat bergantung pada kepemimpinan visioner kepala sekolah dan konsistensi implementasi program. Implikasi dari penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya pengembangan kompetensi kepala sekolah dalam merancang program pembentukan karakter yang kontekstual dan berkelanjutan, serta pentingnya membangun ekosistem pendidikan karakter yang melibatkan seluruh pemangku kepentingan pendidikan.*

INTRODUCTION

Education for human life is a primary or absolute need that must be fulfilled throughout life (Firdausi & Dewi, 2023; Silitonga et al., 2023). Without education, it is impossible for a human group to live and develop with the ideals of progress, prosperity, and happiness according to the concept of their worldview. Education is a process to change the identity of a learner to be more advanced. According to H. Horne, education is a process that occurs continuously (eternally) from higher adjustments for human beings who have developed physically and mentally, who are free and aware of God, as manifested in the surrounding nature, intellectual, emotional, and humanity of humans (Astuti, 2019a).

Educational institutions have an important role in shaping the personality and moral behavior of children (Alia et al., 2020). Educational institutions also have an important role in providing understanding and fortresses for children to avoid the negative bondage of mass media. Therefore, in anticipation of the negative impact of the mass media, educational institutions, apart from providing science, technology and arts as well as creative thinking skills, must also be able to form Indonesian human beings with personality, morals, faith and piety towards God Almighty (Fauzi et al., 2024; Mukhlis, 2020).

Character education is important for the advancement of moral education in Indonesia. Salahudin and Alkrienciechie explained that character is a characteristic of a person or group of people that contains values, abilities, moral capacity, and resilience in facing difficulties and challenges (Fiolanisa et al., 2023; Jasmana, 2021). Furthermore, Kurniawan revealed that a person's character is formed from the habits he does, both attitudes and words that he often does to others (Mazing et al., 2023). Meanwhile, according to Wibowo, character is a natural trait of the human soul that characterizes a person in acting and interacting in the family and society (Muflikhun & Khobir, 2024). The definition of character is also expressed by Samani and Hariyanto as something typical of a person as a way of thinking and behavior to live and cooperate in relation to others who can make decisions and be accountable for their actions (Maharani, 2023).

Character Development Management is a very important factor in building a young generation that makes the country, nation and homeland prosperous and peaceful because it is based on the beginning of a noble character so as to create seeds as children with character and quality, character development in the family is carried out by examples and examples from parents to children. It is very concerning that character deterioration does not only occur among young people, but also occurs among adults, even parents (Erviana, 2021; Tirtoni, 2022). Character deterioration in children can be seen by the number of students brawling, getting drunk, gambling, disobeying parents and even killing. For this reason, a strategic effort is needed to restore this condition, by re-instilling the importance of the role of parents and education in fostering students' morals.

Strategy is a comprehensive plan that integrates all resources and capabilities that have long-term goals to win the competition (Masrur et al., 2021; Nasution et al., 2022). Therefore, strategy is a powerful and unavoidable management instrument, including in school management. A school strategy describes the methods and approaches used to achieve its strategic objectives. To achieve the school's objectives, the evaluation of strategic alternatives using definite criteria and the selection of an alternative or group of alternatives that may become the school's strategy (Amelia et al., 2023; Manurung et al., 2022).

The quality of education is an issue of concern to the Indonesian government. This is evidenced by the role of the Ministry of Education and Culture in expanding and improving the quality of education in Indonesia to date. Education quality itself is a state, condition, appearance, or performance shown by each component of the education unit in achieving predetermined goals, interacting with the environment, and satisfying students/users/society (Rohmah, 2020; Yaqin et al., 2024).

Meanwhile, according to Vincent Gaspers, argues that: "quality can be distinguished in two definitions, namely conventional definitions and strategic definitions. As according to the

conventional definition, quality is to describe the direct characteristics of a product, such as: performance, reliability, ease of use, aesthetics. Meanwhile, according to the strategic definition, quality is everything that is able to meet the wants or needs of customers (meeting the need of customers).

In the world of education, quality is also known as the quality of education (Purwaningsih, 2022). The quality of education in schools must be considered and improved in order to be better and of high quality. This is a challenge that must be responded positively by educational institutions. Quality in the field of education includes the quality of input, process, output, and outcome (Munzir, 2022). Educational input is declared quality if it is ready to process in accordance with national minimum standards in the field of education. The educational process can be declared quality if it is able to create an active, creative, innovative and fun learning atmosphere so that educational goals can be achieved properly. Output is declared quality if the learning outcomes achieved by students in both academic and non-academic fields are high. Output is declared quality if the learning outcomes achieved by students in both academic and non-academic fields are high. Outcome is declared quality if graduates are quickly absorbed in the world of work and institutions that need these graduates and stakeholders are satisfied with graduates from these educational institutions.

The National Education Standards (SNP) as stipulated in Government Regulation Number 19 of 2005 concerning National Education Standards and other relevant laws and regulations are the minimum criteria for the education system in all jurisdictions of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (Yanti & Syahrani, 2021). In other words, SNP is the minimum standard that must be met by all educational institutions in Indonesia to ensure the quality of education (Setiyo, 2021). SNP is fulfilled by education units and education unit organizers systematically and gradually within the medium-term framework set out in the strategic plan of the education unit or program.

In its current implementation, the achievement of the National Education Standards can be known through the school's Quality Report Card and Education Report Card, which are published annually. The Quality Report Card is an internal quality assurance instrument in the form of an education unit self-evaluation, where the indicators measure the achievement of eight national standards (Yunianto & Sutama, 2024). The data in the Quality Report Card is sourced from the Basic Education Data (Dapodik) and is also input directly by the education unit through the Quality Report Card application (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). In contrast to the Education Report Card, the Education Report Card is a replacement or refinement of the Quality Report Card, where indicators are compiled based on education inputs, processes and outputs (Suyadnya, 2024). In the Education Report Card, education units do not fill in data directly into the instrument, but data is taken from existing systems, including from the National Assessment, the Basic Education Data (Dapodik), the Management Information System for Continuing Professional Development (SIMPKB), the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), and other relevant sources. Education units are only required to enter data in Dapodik and then take the National Assessment (Muchtar & Suryani, 2019a, 2019b).

Based on this, it is known that the Education Quality Report Card is produced from an assessment processing process, one of which is known as the Computer-Based National Assessment (ANBK). ANBK itself is a form of quality control to monitor, evaluate and follow up so that the specified quality requirements are achieved. According to the Ministry of Education and Culture, the National Assessment itself consists of three main instruments, namely the Minimum Competency Assessment (AKM), character survey, and also learning environment survey (Muliasari et al., 2022). Each school will annually receive an Education quality report card that aims to improve its education quality assurance ((Al-Fatih et al., 2022; Dimmera & Purnasari, 2021). Starting from educational planning, quality control, to others well and according to standards.

SMPN 1 and SMPN 4 Situraja is one of the schools that has a good education quality report card in Sumedang Regency. Based on the preliminary observations of the author there, it

is known that schools as formal educational institutions have various advantages. The advantage of the school where the research was conducted is that it is one of the driving schools, in Sumedang Regency and has activities that are habitual, curricular, co-curricular and also extracurricular which already have achievements.

Based on the results of preliminary interviews with the Principal regarding the report card report of SMPN 1 Situraja in 2023, it is known that the percentage of achievement of students' literacy skills is good (95.56% of students have reached the minimum competency), the percentage of achievement of numeracy skills is good (73.33% of students have reached the minimum competency), but the percentage of character achievement that includes the attitudes and behavior of students based on the values of Pancasila students is only (55.46%). Meanwhile, the report card from SMPN 4 Situraja also has a fairly declining percentage of character. For example, in terms of gotong royong which dropped by 4.83%, while other aspects, namely global diversity and independence, dropped by 2.55% and 0.27% respectively. Overall, the report card score at SMPN 4 Situraja in the character section dropped by 0.17%.

The principal's role is crucial in creating an educational environment that supports students' character development (Thana & Hanipah, 2023). Principals have the power and authority to make policies and strategies that can influence school culture ((Siahaan et al., 2024; Zakiah & Nurjanah, 2024). Therefore, this study will provide valuable insights into how principals can be agents of change in improving student character in schools. In addition, this research is also relevant to the current needs in improving the quality of education in Indonesia. Good character is needed to face social and moral challenges. By understanding the effective strategies used by school principals, we can develop guidelines and recommendations for improving student character in other schools.

By conducting case studies at SMPN 1 and SMPN 4 Situraja, this research is expected to provide a clear picture of the principal's strategic management practices in implementing the "Spensasi Mekar Berseri" program and its impact on student character. The results of this study can be an important reference for principals, teachers and other stakeholders in developing effective strategies to strengthen student character in other schools that have similar characteristics in order to improve their education quality report card.

METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach to examine in depth the principal's strategy in improving student character in junior high schools in Situraja sub-district. The qualitative approach was chosen because it is able to provide a comprehensive and holistic picture of the social phenomenon under study, especially in the context of educational leadership and character building. Through the descriptive method, the researcher seeks to systematically describe the facts and characteristics of the research object precisely, where the main focus is to reveal the various strategies applied by the principal in the student character strengthening program.

Data collection in this study was conducted through three main techniques, namely participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies. In participatory observation, researchers were directly involved in daily activities in the school environment to observe various programs and activities related to student character building. In-depth interviews were conducted with various key informants, including the principal, vice principal, teachers, school staff, and student representatives to obtain detailed information about the implementation of character-building strategies. In addition, documentation studies were conducted on various school documents such as the principal's work program, school strategic plan, activity reports, and documentation of character-building programs that have been implemented.

Data analysis in this study used an interactive model consisting of three stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. In the data reduction stage, researchers carried out a process of selecting, focusing, and simplifying the rough data that emerged from written notes in the field. The data that has been reduced is then presented in a descriptive

narrative form arranged systematically to provide the possibility of drawing conclusions. To ensure data validity, researchers used source and method triangulation techniques, where data obtained from various sources and data collection methods were compared and verified to obtain valid and accountable conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Implementation of student character strengthening at SMPN Situraja District

The implementation of strengthening student character in SMPN Situraja District is a systematic and planned effort in shaping the personalities of students who have noble character, strong character, and high competitiveness. This program is in line with the national policy of Strengthening Character Education (PPK) which integrates core values such as religion, nationalism, independence, mutual cooperation, and integrity into every aspect of learning activities and school life. Through various intracurricular, co-curricular and extracurricular activities, schools in Situraja Sub-district strive to create an educational environment conducive to student character development.

In its implementation, the character strengthening program at SMPN in Situraja sub-district involves all components of the school, from the principal, teachers, administrative staff, to the community around the school. The approach used is holistic and integrated, where character values are not only taught theoretically in the classroom, but also implemented through habituation, role modeling, and the creation of a positive school culture. This is so that student character building can take place effectively and sustainably, resulting in a young generation that is not only academically intelligent but also has a superior personality.

The following are some of the results found by researchers in the implementation of strengthening student character education at SMPN in Situraja sub-district:

1. **General programs and habituation**

   The Principal's strategy in improving student character in Situraja Junior High School is implemented through general programs and habituation that are consistently applied. Through a descriptive qualitative approach, it can be seen that the principal implements various character building programs that are integrated in learning activities and outside of learning. The general programs implemented include the flag ceremony every Monday, the habit of reading the Quran before learning begins, and the implementation of extracurricular activities that support character development such as Scouts, PMR, and student council.

   In its implementation, the habituation strategy is the main key to the success of the student character building program. The principal applies positive habituation such as the 5S culture (Smile, Greet, Salute, Polite, and Courteous), arriving on time, dressing neatly, throwing garbage in its place, and carrying out class picket regularly. This habit is carried out in a sustainable manner and involves all school members, including teachers and staff, to set a good example for the students.

   Through in-depth observations and interviews conducted in this descriptive qualitative research, it was revealed that the principal's strategy in integrating general and habituation programs has had a positive impact on student character building. The students showed improvement in terms of discipline, responsibility, social care, and religion. This success is inseparable from the consistency of the principal in monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the program, as well as the active support of all school components in creating an environment conducive to student character building.

2. **Integration in learning**

   The principal's strategy in improving student character in junior high schools in Situraja sub-district is implemented through the integration of character values into the learning process in the classroom. This approach is carried out by integrating character values such as honesty, responsibility, discipline, religion, and social care into the Learning Implementation Plan (RPP) in each subject. Teachers are encouraged to design learning that

does not only focus on cognitive aspects, but also emphasizes character building through varied learning methods such as group discussions, project-based learning, and role-playing.

Based on the results of research using descriptive qualitative methods through observation, interviews, and documentation studies, it was found that the strategy of integrating character values in learning has a positive impact on students' character development. The teachers implement character values in a planned and systematic manner in daily learning activities. For example, in mathematics learning, the value of honesty is instilled through the activity of doing problems independently, while in social studies learning, the value of social care is developed through discussions about social issues.

Principals play an active role in supervising and evaluating the implementation of character value integration in learning. Monitoring is conducted regularly to ensure the effectiveness of the strategies implemented and provide feedback to teachers. In addition, principals also facilitate the development of teacher competencies in integrating character values through workshops and training. This shows that the success of the character value integration strategy in learning is highly dependent on the commitment and collaboration between the principal and all school components.

3. **Extracurricular activities**

This descriptive qualitative research revealed that the main strategy applied by junior high school principals in Situraja Sub-district in improving student character is through the development of planned and directed extracurricular activities. Extracurricular activities were chosen as a forum for character building because they can provide direct experience for students to develop various positive values such as discipline, cooperation, responsibility, and creativity outside formal lesson hours.

Through in-depth observations and interviews, it was revealed that the principal implemented various extracurricular programs covering the fields of scouting, arts, sports and religion. Each extracurricular activity is designed with specific objectives in character building, for example, scouting activities to improve discipline and independence, art activities to develop creativity and social sensitivity, and religious activities to strengthen students' spiritual and moral values.

The results showed that this strategy proved to be effective in improving students' character, which was reflected in positive behavioral changes displayed in daily life at school. The extracurricular coach teachers work closely with the Principal in conducting regular monitoring and evaluation of students' character development. This approach also received positive support from parents who saw significant changes in their children's attitudes and behavior, both in the school environment and at home.

4. **Parent and community involvement**

The principal's strategy in improving student character in Situraja Junior High School through parental and community involvement is a comprehensive and sustainable approach. Based on the descriptive qualitative research conducted, principals actively build effective two-way communication with parents through regular meetings, digital communication groups and liaison books. This allows parents to continuously monitor their child's character development and actively participate in the character education process.

In its implementation, the principal develops programs that involve the participation of the community around the school. These programs include social service activities, gotong royong and local culture preservation that involve community leaders as role models and mentors. Through a descriptive qualitative approach, it is revealed that this community involvement provides real experiences for students in developing character values such as social care, mutual cooperation, and respect for local culture.

The results show that this collaborative strategy between school, parents and community creates a conducive environment for students' character building. The students not only learn about character values at school but also see their application directly in the context of family and community. The descriptive qualitative approach used in this study enabled an in-depth

understanding of how parental and community involvement contributes to students' character building through various programs and activities initiated by the school principal.

5. **Monitoring and evaluation system**

In an effort to improve student character in Situraja Junior High School, the principal implements a strategy that focuses on a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system. This approach is carried out through direct observation of students' behavior in learning activities and outside the classroom, as well as involving all school components including teachers, staff and parents in the process of monitoring students' character development. This monitoring system is carried out regularly and structured to ensure that any changes in students' attitudes and behaviors can be detected early on.

Through the descriptive qualitative method, principals can collect in-depth data and information about students' character development through various instruments such as observation sheets, interviews and anecdotal records. The collected data is then analyzed to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the ongoing character building program, as well as to find areas that need improvement or strengthening. This qualitative approach allows principals to understand the context and social dynamics that influence students' character building more deeply.

Continuous evaluation becomes the basis for principals in making decisions and formulating policies related to character building programs. Evaluation results are used to modify or improve strategies that are less effective, as well as develop new programs that are more in line with the needs and characteristics of students. Through this systematic monitoring and evaluation system, the principal can ensure that the efforts to improve students' character run in accordance with the predetermined goals and have a measurable positive impact on the development of students' personalities.

The principal's strategy to improve character at SMPN Situraja Sub-district

1. **Character-based School Culture Development Strategy**

The principal's strategy to improve student character at SMPN Kecamatan Situraja focuses on a comprehensive and integrated approach, where one of the main approaches is the development of a character-based school culture. This character-based school culture is created by introducing and instilling character values through various daily activities, starting from the morning routine to activities outside of class hours. The principal strives to make values such as discipline, responsibility, honesty and cooperation an integral part of the school culture, so that students get used to applying them in their daily lives. By building a culture that prioritizes character, the school hopes that these values are not only applied in the school environment but also become provisions for students outside of school.

Direct coaching through extracurricular activities and special programs is also an important strategy for character strengthening. The principal realizes that extracurricular activities such as scouting, sports, arts and religious activities can be an effective medium in shaping students' positive characters, such as cooperation, discipline and responsibility. Special programs such as leadership training, social service activities, or character camps held regularly can enrich students' experiences in interacting and learning to practice positive values in real life. Principals ensure that each extracurricular activity has a structured character teaching element so that students not only learn about skills but also important values in interacting with others.

Strengthening the role of teachers as role models is another important step in the principal's strategy. Teachers at SMPN in Situraja sub-district are actively involved as role models who reflect the character traits they want to build in students. Principals conduct regular training to improve teachers' competencies in integrating character education in teaching and learning activities. Teachers are given guidance and support to link each subject with relevant character values, for example through discussions on honesty, responsibility or

cooperation in the context of the lesson. By promoting exemplary behavior, teachers are expected to inspire students to adopt the values they demonstrate in their daily lives.

In addition, the principal also applies the reward and positive reinforcement approach in shaping students' character. Rewarding students who demonstrate positive behaviors, such as honesty, craftsmanship, or concern for others, is done regularly as a form of appreciation and motivation for other students. These awards can be in the form of certificates, plaques, or recognition in front of other students during school ceremonies. This approach aims to encourage students to be more motivated to behave positively, not just for the sake of the award but because they realize the importance of character values in their lives.

Finally, collaboration with parents and the community is an additional strategy that is equally important. The principal realizes that character education must be carried out synergistically between the school, family and the surrounding environment. For this reason, the principal holds regular meetings with parents to raise their awareness about the importance of character education and how to implement it at home. In addition, the school also collaborates with local community leaders, such as religious leaders or the village government, to support activities that strengthen students' character, such as community service, commemoration of holidays and other social activities. This collaboration is expected to strengthen the application of positive character that starts at school, continues at home and is supported by the students' surrounding environment.

2. **Strategies for Strengthening Teacher Competence in Character Education**

In an effort to improve student character at SMPN Kecamatan Situraja, the principal applies several effective strategies, one of which is the strategy of strengthening teacher competence in character education. Principals realize that teachers have a central role as role models in students' character development, so it is important to equip them with adequate understanding and skills in character education. Principals conduct regular training and workshops that focus on character education, helping teachers understand how to integrate character values in every subject and classroom activity. Through this strengthening of teachers' competencies, teachers are expected to be able to set a good example and apply teaching methods that emphasize the importance of positive attitudes and behaviours at school.

In addition to special training for teachers, the principal also developed a character habituation program in the school environment as another strategy in improving student character. This habituation program aims to create a school culture that is conducive to character building. For example, the principal sets daily activities such as prayer before the lesson starts, greetings and salutations between students and teachers, keeping the school environment clean, and enforcing the queuing culture in every activity. This habituation program not only makes students accustomed to good behavior, but also instills character values slowly but effectively. With consistent habituation, this good behavior is expected to be internalized in students and become a positive habit that they carry outside the school environment.

The principal also implements a rewards and sanctions program that aims to encourage students to be more motivated in showing good attitudes and behaviors. In this program, students who show positive attitudes, such as discipline, honesty, or helping others, will be rewarded in the form of certificates, praise, or even simple gifts as a form of appreciation. Conversely, for students who commit violations, educational sanctions, such as social activities or reflection, are applied so that they understand the consequences of their behavior. This strategy helps students understand that every behavior has an impact, both positive and negative, and aims to encourage them to be more responsible for their actions.

Increasing parental involvement in the character education program is also an important strategy implemented by school principals. The principal tries to establish good communication with parents through regular meetings, school communication groups and parenting programs that educate parents about the importance of their role in supporting

children's character development. By actively involving parents, the school hopes to build synergy between education at school and at home, so that the values taught to students at school are also reinforced in the family environment. Through this parental involvement, it is expected that students will feel supported by the adults around them in their character development, both inside and outside school.

Finally, the principal implemented a mentoring program for students who show special needs in character aspects. This program allows teachers or school staff to become mentors for certain students who need more guidance in terms of discipline, empathy, or sense of responsibility. Through this mentoring program, students get special attention and direct coaching tailored to their individual needs. The principal assigns mentors to guide students with a personal approach, so that students feel heard and understood. This strategy is expected to form strong relationships between teachers and students, and create an environment that supports students in improving and strengthening their character on an ongoing basis.

3. **Strategies for Empowering the Role of Parents and Communities**

In an effort to improve student character at SMPN Kecamatan Situraja, the principal has an important role in developing and implementing effective strategies. One of the main strategies implemented is empowering the role of parents and the community. The principal realizes that character education cannot only be left entirely to the school, but needs support from parents and the surrounding community. By involving parents in various school activities such as homeroom meetings, parenting seminars and mentoring programs, principals try to create awareness among parents about their important role in children's character building. Through this approach, it is expected that parents can more actively support and strengthen the character values instilled at school.

In addition, the principal also seeks to build cooperation with the local community to support the student character development program. For example, working with community leaders, religious leaders and local institutions in organizing activities that promote character values such as cooperation, tolerance and social care. By involving the community, students not only get examples of positive behavior from the school but also see its application in real life. The principal often invites community leaders to give motivational and character education talks, which are expected to inspire students to have good attitudes and values.

The development of character-based extracurricular programs is also an important part of the principal's strategy in shaping students' character. Extracurricular programs such as Scouting, sports activities, arts and social communities provide a means for students to learn about values such as cooperation, responsibility and leadership. The principal ensures that each extracurricular program has a clear character education content and is geared towards developing the soft skills that students need. Through these activities, students can practice and strengthen positive values outside of academic learning, so that good character can be formed holistically.

Strengthening school culture is also an effective strategy in improving student character. Principals work together with teachers and staff to create a positive school environment that supports character building. The culture of mutual respect, responsibility and discipline is applied in various aspects of school activities. For example, the implementation of the greeting culture in the morning, the habit of cleaning the classroom environment, and the implementation of time discipline in every activity. The principal emphasizes the importance of consistency in the application of school rules and culture so that these positive values can be strongly embedded in students. Thus, a strong school culture can shape positive attitudes and habits in students.

Finally, principals implement a character-based learning approach in the school curriculum. Teachers are encouraged to integrate character values in every subject taught so that learning does not only focus on academic aspects but also on character building. The principal organizes training for teachers to deepen their understanding of character-based

learning methods, such as project-based learning that requires students' cooperation, responsibility and creativity. With this approach, students are expected to not only understand academic concepts, but also understand how character values can be applied in daily life.

4. Character-Based Extracurricular Program Development Strategy

The principal's strategy in improving student character at SMPN in Situraja sub-district includes various approaches, one of which is the development of character-based extracurricular programs. Extracurricular activities such as scouts, sports, arts and religious activities are effective means to internalize positive values such as discipline, cooperation and responsibility. In these activities, students are invited to actively participate and practice character values in real situations. Principals direct supervising teachers so that each extracurricular activity not only focuses on technical skills but also integrates character values in accordance with the national character education objectives. Through extracurricular activities specifically designed to instill character, students can learn directly and apply positive character traits in their daily lives.

In addition to the development of extracurricular programs, the establishment of a positive school culture is the principal's main focus in the character improvement strategy. The principal and teachers strive to create a conducive environment for students' character development by building a culture of mutual respect, support and discipline. Steps such as implementing a daily habituation program, such as greeting, greeting and smiling, as well as carrying out the flag ceremony with discipline, are part of the formation of a positive culture at school. A strong school culture will form a safe and comfortable environment for students to grow and learn, so that character values can be formed more naturally. The principal also introduces firm and consistent rules in implementing school discipline as a form of applying the values of honesty and discipline that must be followed by all school members.

The principal also applies the approach of strengthening character values-based learning in academic activities. Teachers are instructed to include character elements in every subject they teach. For example, in Indonesian lessons, students are invited to discuss stories that contain moral messages or national values, while in Social Science lessons, students are guided to understand the importance of empathy and social responsibility. The principal ensures that all teaching staff understand the concept of character education and are able to integrate it well into the learning process. In this way, students not only gain academic knowledge but also learn character values that are applied in daily life.

Cooperation with external parties such as parents and community leaders is also an important part of the principal's strategy in improving student character. The principal establishes good communication with parents through regular meetings and school activities that involve families. In certain events, community leaders are also invited to give lectures or motivations relevant to students' character development, for example on the importance of respecting parents and caring for the surrounding environment. This cooperation helps give students a thorough understanding that the character values they learn at school are also supported by parents and the wider community, so they feel motivated to apply positive character traits wherever they are.

Finally, periodic evaluation and assessment of student character is also a strategic step implemented by the principal. In addition to academic assessment, each teacher is asked to evaluate students' character development through daily observations and notes. This evaluation not only assesses students' discipline and responsibility, but also other aspects such as caring, honesty and cooperation. The results of this evaluation are then reported to parents as part of the student progress report, so that they can work together with the school in improving or enhancing their child's character at home. Through a structured character evaluation, the principal can see the progress made by the students and assess the effectiveness of the program implemented, so that the program can be adjusted to achieve optimal results.

CONCLUSION

Research on the principal's strategy in improving students' character in junior high school in Situraja sub-district revealed several important findings that can be valuable lessons for the world of education. The principal has implemented various comprehensive and systematic strategies, including the development of character-building programs that are integrated in learning activities, the habituation of positive values in daily life at school, and the active involvement of all school components including teachers, staff, parents and the community in efforts to build student character. The strategies implemented also include optimizing the function of extracurricular activities as a forum for developing students' interests and talents as well as instilling character values, providing good examples from all school members, and creating a school environment conducive to fostering positive character. The following are some of the strategies implemented by principals at SMPN Situraja in improving student character, including the following Character-based School Culture Development Strategy, Strategy for Strengthening Teacher Competence in Character Education, Strategies for Empowering the Role of Parents and Communities, and Character-based Extracurricular Program Development Strategy.

The results of the implementation of these strategies show significant positive changes in the character of students in junior high schools in Situraja District. This can be seen from the increase in discipline, responsibility, honesty, social care, and religiosity of students reflected in their daily behavior at school and outside school. This success is inseparable from the strong commitment of the principal in leading and mobilizing all school components to jointly build student character, as well as active support from various stakeholders. However, there are still some challenges that need to be overcome, such as the need to increase consistency in program implementation, strengthen coordination between related parties, and provide more adequate supporting facilities and infrastructure. This study recommends the importance of continuous evaluation of the effectiveness of character-building programs and the development of new innovations in student character building strategies that are in accordance with the times and the needs of students.

The results of the research on the principal's strategy in improving student character in junior high schools in Situraja sub-district have implications that the success of student character building is highly dependent on the transformative leadership of the principal in developing comprehensive and sustainable character-building programs. Based on the findings, some recommendations include: principals need to strengthen collaboration with teachers, parents, and the community in implementing character education programs; develop an effective monitoring and evaluation system to measure the success of the program; provide periodic training to teachers on innovative character-building methods; and integrate character values into various aspects of learning and extracurricular activities consistently.

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