

The Role and Strategy of Spiritual Leadership of School Principals in Fostering the Character of Environmental Care for Elementary School Students

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Abstract

This research aims to analyze the role and spiritual leadership strategy of school principals in fostering the character of caring for the environment of elementary school students. Based on the theory of Spiritual Leadership Fry (vision, hope/faith, altruistic love), this study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method at SDN Ekologi Kahuripan Padjajaran, Purwakarta. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with principals, teachers, and supervisors; participatory observation of learning activities and environmental programs; as well as documentation studies on school policies, programs, and archives. Data analysis is carried out through reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawn, with triangulation of sources, methods, and time to ensure validity. The results of the study show that the spiritual leadership of school principals plays a central role through three main functions: as a role model that displays examples of ecological behavior; as a decision maker who formulates ecological vision, waste sorting policies, cleanliness pickets, and the integration of environmental themes in the curriculum; as well as a facilitator who provides environmentally friendly facilities such as waste banks, classroom gardens, compost areas, and recycling corners. The strategies used include the integration of environmental education in intracurricular, strengthening extracurricular and co-curricular activities based on experience, and developing a green school culture based on spiritual values. The findings show an improvement in students' ecological behaviors, including the habits of maintaining cleanliness, caring for plants, saving energy, and actively participating in environmental programs. This research confirms that spiritual leadership is an effective transformative approach to integrating spiritual values and environmental education in a sustainable manner in primary schools.

INTRODUCTION

Schools have a strategic role in shaping the character of caring for the environment in students so that they not only excel intellectually, but also have ecological sensitivity which is an important provision to face global challenges such as climate change, pollution, and natural resource crises (Abou, 2025). At the elementary school level, environmental education must be integrated through thematic learning, routine activities, teacher examples, and a school culture that is oriented towards sustainability. This is in line with the goals of the SDGs, particularly quality education and action on climate change, which affirm the importance of environmental education as part of sustainable development (Nogueira, 2022).

The success of the implementation of environmental education in schools is largely determined by the quality of the principal's leadership. The principal not only plays the role of an administrative manager, but also a visionary leader who is able to mobilize teachers, students, and all school residents to implement environmentally friendly behavior through a clear ecological vision, supportive policies, and consistent programs (Pebriantika et al., 2020). Values-based leadership and spirituality

also allow school principals to instill awareness that protecting the environment is a moral and spiritual responsibility to God and future generations (Afsar et al., 2016). Thus, effective school leadership is the main factor in forming a sustainable school culture and environmental care character in students.

In this context, the spiritual leadership of the school principal is a key factor in realizing an environmentally friendly school with ecological care character. Spiritual leadership according to Fry (2003) includes three main dimensions: vision, hope/faith, and altruistic love, which lead leaders to build common meaning and goals, foster confidence in the achievement of goals, and create an environment full of love and care (Samul, 2021). When the principal applies transcendental values such as honesty, compassion, self-awareness, and responsibility for life (López et al., 2025), he is able to foster a spirit of devotion and a sense of ecological responsibility for teachers and students. The example, inspiration, and continuous guidance provided by the principal ultimately form a school culture that is in harmony with nature, an important foundation for the formation of students' character at the elementary school level.

In terms of regulations, attention to environmental education has been contained in various national policies, such as Permendikbud Number 33 of 2019 concerning the Adiwiyata School Program which requires the integration of environmental care values in school learning and culture (Pambudi et al., 2020). The Independent Curriculum also emphasizes the Pancasila Student Profile, especially the dimension of faith and mutual cooperation which can be internalized in actions to protect the environment (Permatasari et al., 2025). At the local level, Purwakarta Regent Regulation Number 103 of 2021 concerning Agriculture in Bale Atikan (Rukajat et al., 2025), is a strategic innovation that integrates farming activities and contextual learning to foster ecological awareness and environmental spirituality in elementary schools.

The results of the preliminary study showed that even though elementary schools in Purwakarta district have implemented the Tatanen program at Bale Atikan as well as cleaning activities, students' environmental care behavior is still far from optimal. In some schools classrooms often look dirty because students don't dispose of garbage in place, participation in hygiene pickets is low, and many school garden plants wither due to lack of care. The cleanliness of toilets and handwashing areas has also not been well maintained, while student involvement in recycling and reforestation activities is still minimal. Various obstacles such as limited resources, weak routine supervision, and the lack of integration of environmental values in learning also increase the challenges (Rukajat et al., 2025).

In the context of environmental education, spiritual leadership offers a more in-depth approach because it is oriented towards the formation of meaning, life goals, and moral values that guide all school activities. Principals with spiritual leadership not only lead to academic achievement, but also instill gratitude, love, and responsibility for nature as part of God's mandate (Jamaluddin & Pratiwi, 2024). The spiritual leadership of school principals plays an important role in fostering students' environmental care character through example as role models (Tipmontree & Asama, 2021), the establishment of ecological policies as decision-makers (Pebriantika et al., 2020), and the provision of facilities, programs, and environmental coaching as facilitators that move all school residents to behave environmentally in a sustainable manner (Halek & Utomo, 2021).

SDN Ekologi Kahuripan Padjajaran is an example of how spiritual leadership can be translated into a real strategy in fostering environmental awareness in students. The principal builds a clear ecological vision, fosters hope and belief that all school residents are able to protect the environment, and fosters altruistic love, the main dimension of spiritual leadership which is reflected in example, habituation, and a culture of caring for each other (Müller et al., 2020). Through spiritual coaching, reflection activities, and the integration of religious values in learning, the principal is able to form a school climate that is in harmony with nature. As a result, students not only adhere to hygiene rules, but also develop ecological awareness that grows from the heart (Pebriantika et al., 2020).

Research shows that spiritual leadership has been shown to be effective in building environmentally caring characters in elementary school students. Principals who apply a spiritual vision are able to create a religious and ecological culture that involves all school residents in

environmentally friendly activities (Hadi & Ummah, 2020). School example, habituation, and conditioning have proven to be strong in fostering students' environmentally caring behavior (Oktaviana et al., 2025). In addition, spiritual leadership also forms a safe and positive school climate, so that students are better prepared to develop their ecological awareness (Furqon & Nurdin, 2025). An approach to learning based on ecology and spiritual values helps to increase students' interest and positive attitudes towards environmental sustainability (Tipmontree & Asama, 2021).

The urgency of this research lies in the importance of strengthening the character of environmental care for students since elementary school, especially in the midst of increasing environmental degradation and global demands for ecological literacy. Although various environmental programs have been implemented, the gap between policy and student real behavior demonstrates the need for a more meaningful and transformative approach to leadership. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the role and spiritual leadership strategies of school principals in fostering students' environmental awareness and identify effective strategies that are able to integrate spiritual values with environmental education practices in a sustainable manner in elementary schools.

METHODS

This research focuses on the spiritual leadership strategy of school principals in fostering the character of caring for the environment in elementary school students at SDN Ekologi Kahuripan Padjajaran, Purwakarta. A qualitative approach with a case study method is used to deeply understand how school principals carry out their roles as role models who display examples of ecological behavior, as decision makers who formulate environmentally friendly policies, and as facilitators who provide programs, facilities, and sustainable coaching. The spiritual leadership strategies explored are based on Fry's theory, which includes three main dimensions: vision, hope/faith, and altruistic love (L. Fry, 2015; L. W. Fry, 2003; L. W. Fry et al., 2017; Monanisa et al., 2024). The achievement of caring for the environment in elementary school students can be observed through cleanliness behavior, such as disposing and sorting waste properly and carrying out picketing with discipline. Care is seen from caring for plants, saving energy, and not damaging facilities. Students also participate in environmental programs, familiarize themselves with environmentally friendly behaviors, demonstrate ecological awareness, and understand the basic concepts of environmental conservation (Safitri et al., 2022). SDN Ekologi Kahuripan Padjajaran was chosen purposively because the principal showed a strong commitment to integrating spiritual values, green school culture, and ecological practices in students' daily lives.

The data collection technique in this study used three main methods, namely in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and documentation studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Interviews were conducted with school principals, teachers, and supervisors to gain a comprehensive understanding of spiritual leadership strategies and their implementation in shaping the character of caring for the environment of students. Participatory observation is carried out to see firsthand the leadership practices, learning activities, and ecological behavior of students in the real context of the school. Meanwhile, the documentation study was used to examine school archives, policies, environmental programs, and activity records as supporting evidence for the analysis.

Data analysis in this study was carried out through three main stages, namely reduction, presentation, and qualitative conclusion drawing (Fred & Singh, 2021). In the reduction stage, data from interviews, observations, and documentation is selected, categorized, and focused on information relevant to the principal's spiritual leadership strategy. Furthermore, the data is presented in the form of narratives, matrix and thematic findings to facilitate interpretation. The process of drawing conclusions is carried out continuously until a consistent pattern and meaning is obtained. Triangulation of sources, methods, and time is used to ensure the validity of the data, so that the research results are valid, robust, and accountable (C. Wang et al., 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The results of the study show that the spiritual leadership of the principal at SDN Ekologi Kahuripan Padjajaran plays a central role in fostering the character of caring for the environment of students. These findings were obtained through in-depth interviews with principals, teachers, and supervisors, as well as participatory observation of school activities. The principal emphasized that his leadership orientation is based on spiritual values such as sincerity, moral responsibility, and love for nature. These values are the foundation for all environmental development policies and practices. This integration of spiritual leadership is in line with Fry's theory which emphasizes three main dimensions: vision, hope/faith, and altruistic love, which are clearly reflected in the principal's behavior and policies.

The role of the principal as a role model is seen very strongly through the results of observation. The researchers noted that school principals consistently exhibited eco-friendly behaviors, such as turning off unused electricity, picking up small garbage in the school yard, as well as watering plants every morning before starting administrative activities. Teachers said in interviews that this example had a great influence on their behavior, and some teachers even admitted to imitating the principal's habits in garden maintenance and waste sorting. This example is not just symbolic, but it triggers changes in students' behavior because they see a leader figure who truly carries out ecological values in real terms.

As decision makers, school principals take an important role in formulating environmentally-based policies and programs. Based on the documentation of school documents, it can be seen that the principal has included an ecological vision in the School Work Plan (RKS), including waste sorting policies, cleanliness picket obligations, and the integration of environmental themes in learning activities. This policy was developed without coercion, but through deliberation with teachers so as to foster a sense of ownership. The results of the interview with the head of the school's Adiwiyata team show that the principal is committed to ensuring that all environmental policies run consistently, not just a ceremonial program.

Peran kepala sekolah sebagai fasilitator terlihat melalui upaya menyediakan sarana pendukung aktivitas ramah lingkungan. Berdasarkan observasi, sekolah memiliki bank sampah, kebun kelas, area kompos, serta pojok daur ulang yang aktif digunakan oleh guru dan siswa. Kepala sekolah mengungkapkan bahwa fasilitas tersebut diadakan melalui kerja sama dengan komite sekolah dan pihak desa, menunjukkan dimensi altruistic love dalam bentuk kepedulian terhadap kesejahteraan bersama. Dokumentasi foto menunjukkan bahwa siswa rutin melakukan penyiraman kebun, mengolah sampah organik, dan mengikuti kegiatan praktik bercocok tanam yang dipandu guru.

The dimension of vision in spiritual leadership is reflected in the school's ecological vision: "Realizing ecologically intelligent, locally wise, globally minded students." In the interview, the principal emphasized that the vision is not only written but translated into daily activities. Morning observations show that students and teachers have a routine of "Morning Greetings and Clean Environment," where each class is responsible for guarding a specific area. This clear vision provides direction for all school residents to participate in the movement to maintain cleanliness and environmental sustainability.

The dimension of hope/faith is seen when the principal fosters the belief that all students are able to implement environmentally caring behavior. In an interview, the principal stated that despite the diverse backgrounds of the students, he believes that education is capable of changing behavior gradually. This belief encourages school principals to motivate teachers not to get tired of reminding students about cleanliness, energy saving, and plant care. The third-grade teacher said in an interview that "the principal always believes that every child can change if they get used to it," which reflects that hope/faith is internalized in the school culture.

The dimension of altruistic love is depicted in the harmonious relationship between the principal, teachers, and students. Based on observations, the principal always greets students in a

friendly manner, giving small appreciations such as praise or stickers when students manage to show environmentally caring behavior. This attitude of affection and care makes students feel valued and increases motivation to take positive actions towards the environment. BK teachers stated that the approach of compassion is more effective than the punishment method in building students' character, especially related to hygiene and discipline behavior.

The intracurricular strategy is implemented through the integration of environmental materials in subjects such as Science, PPKn, Indonesian, and Religion. Based on the documentation of the learning tools, teachers include topics such as the waste cycle, water conservation, and environmental ethics in the lesson plan. Observation of science learning in grade IV shows that teachers invite students to observe the type of waste in the school environment and discuss its impact. This strategy shows that the principal encourages teachers to use a contextual learning approach so that students understand ecological concepts through real experience.

Extracurricular strategies are realized through Scouting, Environmental Clubs, and Green Journalism activities. Activity documentation shows that every weekend students participate in tree planting programs, garbage patrols, and environmental poster publications. Interviews with extracurricular coaches revealed that the principal provided operational funding support and invited resource persons from the environmental agency to provide training. These extracurricular activities not only strengthen students' skills, but also foster the habit of caring for the environment in a fun way.

Co-curricular strategies are carried out through thematic projects such as "One Student One Plant," classroom cleaning competitions, recycling activities, and Eco-Art exhibitions. In the observation of the cleanliness competition activities, it was seen that the enthusiasm between classes in arranging a mini garden and maintaining plants. The principal was present in person as a judge, giving feedback to the students, as well as emphasizing the importance of caring for the environment with love. These projects reinforce intracurricular learning and provide students with opportunities to practice spiritual motivation in the form of real action.

School culture strategy is the most dominant aspect of spiritual leadership. Observations found various daily routines such as joint prayer that emphasizes the message "nature is God's mandate," Clean Friday activities, and a ban on the use of single-use plastics. Environmental education posters are displayed in the school corridors, and each class has a green corner that is maintained on a rotating basis. This green school culture not only builds habits, but also forms an ecological consciousness rooted in spiritual values.

Data analysis shows that the role of school principals as role models, decision makers, and facilitators, which is strengthened by Fry's three-dimensional spiritual leadership strategy (vision, hope/faith, altruistic love) has succeeded in creating an educational environment that is conducive to the growth of environmental caring character. The findings show an increase in students' ecological behavior, ranging from the habit of disposing of garbage in its place, involvement in environmental programs, the ability to sort waste, to concern for plants and energy saving. The synergy between spiritual leadership and environmental programs based on intracurricular, cocurricular, extracurricular, and school culture is a determining factor in the formation of environmental caring character. Thus, spiritual leadership proved to be an effective approach in environmental education in elementary schools.

Discussion

The spiritual leadership of school principals has a significant contribution in fostering the character of caring for the environment in elementary school students. This is in line with the theory of *Spiritual Leadership* developed by (L. Fry, 2015; L. W. Fry, 2003; L. W. Fry et al., 2017), which emphasizes that leadership is not only based on structural power, but also on the ability of leaders to present meaning (calling) and a sense of attachment (membership) through three main dimensions: vision, hope/faith, and altruistic love. These three dimensions seem to color various strategies and

leadership practices of school principals, especially in fostering the character of caring for the environment.

The role of school principals as role models in spiritual leadership has proven to be a key mechanism for building a character of caring for the environment. Referring to *Bandura's* Social Learning Theory (Saka, 2024), student behavior is shaped not only through instruction, but through observation of figures who are considered authoritative (Liang et al., 2022). In the perspective of Spiritual Leadership, exemplary is a tangible expression of the dimension of altruistic love, which is the leader's attitude of love, caring, and sincerity in action (Chen et al., 2019). When the principal consistently performs ecological actions such as turning off the electricity, picking up garbage, taking care of plants, he not only shows positive behavior, but also conveys a spiritual message that taking care of the environment is a form of devotion and moral responsibility. This action strengthens the vision of a green school and fosters hope/faith that all school residents are able to appreciate and apply the value of caring for the environment (Jeon & Choi, 2020). This example of harmonization between speech and action creates a strong internalization of ecological values, influencing teachers, students, and the culture of the school as a whole.

On the other hand, the role of the principal as a decision maker and facilitator shows how spiritual leadership does not stop at the personal moral aspect, but is manifested in structural policies and systemic support (Duthely, 2017). The consistency between spiritual values and school policies can be seen from the integration of ecological vision in RKS, the implementation of waste sorting policies, and the strengthening of environment-based learning. This is in line with the view that effective leadership must blend moral values with organizational design to create conditions that sustain ethical behavior (Subhaktiyasa et al., 2024). In addition to setting policy directions, school principals also play a role as facilitators by providing environmental facilities such as waste banks, classroom gardens, and compost areas. The existence of these facilities not only allows for ecological practices, but also reflects the dimension of altruistic love in Fry's theory, which is the leader's concern for collective well-being (Y. Wang et al., 2021). Thus, spiritual leadership operates its influence through a combination of values, examples, policies, and the provision of resources in a synergy that explains its effectiveness in shaping the caring character of the environment of elementary school students.

The dimension of altruistic love can be seen in the way the principal facilitates various supporting facilities such as waste banks, compost areas, classroom gardens, and recycling corners. Altruistic love includes empathy, affection, and care that encourage the creation of a sense of security and togetherness in the organization (Piras et al., 2023). The presence of eco-friendly facilities in schools is not only a form of providing physical facilities, but reflects the principal's commitment as a spiritual leader who presents a learning environment with ecological value and full of care. The garbage bank, classroom garden, compost area, and recycling corner become real practice spaces for students to learn and practice environmentally caring behaviors. Through hands-on experience, students not only understand the concept of the environment, but also develop habits of caring for nature in a sustainable manner. This approach is in line with Kolb's Experiential Learning theory which emphasizes that knowledge develops through cycles of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application (Morris, 2020). When students are actively involved in watering plants, processing compost, or conducting garbage patrols, they not only understand the concept of the environment theoretically, but also build skills and attitudes to care for nature. This experience is the basis for the formation of sustainable habits, because behaviors that are practiced consistently are easier to internalize and become part of the individual's character. The effectiveness of spiritual leadership as a facilitator of ecological activities can be seen from the enthusiasm of students in watering plants, processing compost, and conducting garbage patrols, showing that these facilities have succeeded in becoming an effective medium for internalizing ecological values.

Translating visions into routine activities such as "Morning Greetings and Clean Environment" reinforces the argument that a strong vision only has an impact when combined with real practice.

The principal does not stop at the formulation of an ecological vision, but rather ensures that the vision is presented every day in the school routine (Maran et al., 2022). This routine emphasizes the school environment as a living laboratory for environmental education, which according to Tilbury (1995), is effective in fostering long-term ecological awareness. Furthermore, the hope/faith dimension also plays an important role as a psychological energy that fosters the belief that students are able to change through habituation. Li et al (2018) explain that hope includes a person's belief in his ability to achieve goals. The principal's belief that "every child can change if he gets used to it" becomes a psychological factor that affects the motivation of teachers and students. When leaders have strong beliefs, this creates a positive climate called *psychological empowerment* (Yue et al., 2022), which encourages environment-oriented behaviors. Meanwhile, the dimension of altruistic love strengthens the emotional connection between the principal, teachers, and students. Compassionate approaches such as greeting students, giving small appreciations, or praising environmentally caring behaviors, are in line with Noddings' (2005) theory of the ethics of care, which emphasizes that moral education is most effective when it is based on positive relationships. The finding that students are more responsive to the compassion approach than punishment reinforces the relevance of the theory.

Spiritual leadership strategies are realized through contextual intracurricular learning, experiential extracurricular activities, co-curricular projects, and a consistent green school culture, so that all aspects of cognitive, affective, and behavioral students are integrated in the formation of a character of caring for the environment. The intracurricular strategies implemented by the principal show that spiritual leadership touches not only the emotional and moral dimensions, but also the cognitive ones. The integration of environmental education in subjects (Science, PPKn, Indonesian, Religion) is in line with the Education for Sustainable Development Framework (Espinoza-Ramos & Capucci-Polzin, 2025). For example, in science learning grade IV shows that students are encouraged to think critically about the types of waste and their impacts, reinforcing the idea that contextual learning is an effective strategy for ecological literacy.

Extracurricular strategies such as Scouting, Environmentalist and Conservation Teams, and Green Journalism reflect the principle of experiential learning (Morris, 2020), where students learn through hands-on experience. The support of the principal in providing training and resource persons demonstrates effective participatory leadership in strengthening the capacity and concern of the student environment. Co-curricular strategies such as "Making Liquid Organic Fertilizers" and classroom cleanliness competitions demonstrate a project-based learning approach, which according to Sogen (2023) is effective in fostering student motivation and engagement. Through this activity, students not only understand the concept of the environment, but also practice it in a tangible form. School culture is the most powerful strategy in spiritual leadership. According to Deal & Peterson (2009), a strong school culture is able to shape behavior and values in a profound way. Morning prayers that associate the environment as God's mandate, Clean Friday, the ban on single-use plastics, and environmental education posters create *an ecological culture* that strengthens the internalization of the value of caring for the environment. This green culture is consistent, structured, and repetitive so that it forms an ecological school identity.

Thus, the spiritual leadership of school principals systematically forms the character of caring for the environment through strategic roles (role models, decision makers, facilitators) and through comprehensive strategies (intracurricular, extracurricular, co-curricular, school culture). These findings confirm the theory that spiritual leadership is not only effective in moral and religious contexts, but also in environmental education. Thus, the principal is not only an administrative leader, but a transformative leader who is able to inspire ecological behavior change through values, policies, concrete actions, and school culture.

CONCLUSION

The spiritual leadership of the principal at SDN Ekologi Kahuripan Padjajaran has proven to have a very significant role in fostering the character of caring for the environment of elementary

school students. This leadership is reflected through Fry's three dimensions, namely vision, hope/faith, and altruistic love which are strongly implemented in the role of school principal as role models, decision makers, and facilitators. The ecological example of school principals is the most effective mechanism for internalizing values, while environmentally friendly policies and the provision of educational facilities ensure the sustainability of various environmental programs. Through intracurricular, extracurricular, co-curricular, and green school culture strategies, a learning ecosystem is formed that unites cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects, so that students show improved ecological behaviors such as disposing of garbage in its place, caring for plants, saving energy, and actively participating in environmental conservation programs. These findings have both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the results of the research reinforce the concept of Spiritual Leadership Fry that spiritual value-based leadership is able to create sustainable behavioral change in the context of education. Practically, this study shows that the success of environmental education does not only rely on the curriculum, but is greatly influenced by the examples, policies, and school culture built by leaders. The integration of environmental programs through various learning paths proves that the formation of ecological character requires a holistic and systemic approach. For this reason, school principals are advised to strengthen ecological exemplars and expand environmental policies based on spiritual values; teachers need to increase collaboration in designing contextual learning and experiential environmental activities; schools and committees need to strengthen environmental education facilities and collaborate with external partners; And the Education Office is expected to facilitate spiritual leadership training for school principals so that this approach can be applied more widely as a strategy for building environmental care character in elementary schools.

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