Strengthening Transformational School Culture to Achieve School Excellence

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Abstract. Education plays a crucial role in shaping not only knowledge and skills but also character and social values. However, school culture—a key element in achieving educational excellence—often receives insufficient attention, particularly in Islamic-based educational institutions. In the context of Muhammadiyah schools, integrating Islamic values into daily school life is essential to build a transformative culture that supports both academic and spiritual development. This research aims to examine strategies for transformational school culture in achieving excellent schools within the Muhammadiyah educational environment. A qualitative approach with a case study design was employed. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation and were analyzed interactively using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldana model. The results show that the transformative school culture is implemented through the integration of Islamic values into daily school activities, such as congregational prayers, Qur'anic recitation, and social programs like dawn charity and plastic donation. Strengthening strategies include transformative leadership, exemplary conduct, active involvement of school members, and partnerships with parents. Challenges encountered involve implementation inconsistency, limited resources, and resistance to change. Nevertheless, transformative culture has a positive impact on student character development, improvement of the learning climate, and increased public trust in the school. This study highlights the significance of transformative school culture as a foundation for building excellent Islamic value-based schools.

Keywords: Transformative school culture; Excellent school; Islamic values; Leadership; Muhammadiyah school.

INTRODUCTION

Education has a strategic role in nation building, not only to improve knowledge and skills but also to shape sustainable social and cultural values (Mutasar et al., 2019; Setyoningsih, 2020; Nita et al., 2022). Schools, as formal institutions, hold the responsibility to produce graduates who excel not only academically but also in character and personality (Ismawati et al., 2020). Among the five main aspects in achieving school goals, school culture often receives less attention, even though it greatly determines the effectiveness of educational institutions (Adams, 2009; Ratih et al., 2020; Yudha & Aulia, 2023).

A strong school culture can create a positive learning environment, increase motivation and solidarity, and foster positive behavior among school residents (Kurniawan, 2021). A transformative school culture is important because it encourages innovation, collaboration, and continuous learning (Fullan & Scott, 2014; Hargreaves, 2003; Indarwati, 2020). Recent research shows that transformative school culture can bridge leadership and school quality improvement (Alzoraiki et al., 2024; Wulandari & Nugroho, 2020). Superior schools emerge from a continuous process of cultural transformation, characterized by a conducive learning environment, high academic performance, and effective management (Kautsar et al., 2019; Anwar et al., 2023; Michael et al., 2023; Hikamudin, 2022; Siahaan, 2021). In the Muhammadiyah school environment, school culture must be integrated with Islamic values to remain relevant and form a solid Islamic character (Sandi et al., 2022; Febrianti, 2024). Rosah

et al. (2024) and Khairuddin et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of integrating Islamic values and modern educational practices to form a collaborative and inclusive school culture.

However, studies on strengthening transformative school culture remain limited, especially those focusing on operational strategies and daily contextual practices for integrating Islamic values within a Muhammadiyah elementary school setting. While prior research highlights the importance of value integration (Kurniawan & Susilo, 2021) and the balance between academic and spiritual achievement (Siregar & Puspitasari, 2023), there remains a gap in understanding *how* transformative school culture is concretely implemented, reinforced through routine activities, and collaboratively driven by all school stakeholders in a specific Muhammadiyah school context.

This research aims to identify and analyze strategies to strengthen transformative school culture in Muhammadiyah schools to realize superior schools, with a case study at SD Muhammadiyah Sukorejo, Kendal. The novelty of this study lies in its focused exploration of micro-practices and day-to-day mechanisms—such as the integration of dawn charity (*sedekah subuh*), plastic waste alms, and parental recitation programs (*OMEGA*)—that collectively operationalize transformative culture. Furthermore, it examines the role of transformative leadership not only as a conceptual model but as a lived practice embodied by principals, teachers, and staff in shaping a holistic Islamic school culture. This research is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the development of modern Islamic-based school culture as well as practical benefits for education managers in building a contextual and quality-oriented school culture.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

This research employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore strategies for strengthening transformative school culture in depth at SD Muhammadiyah Sukorejo, Kendal.

The research was conducted in July 2025. SD Muhammadiyah Sukorejo was selected because it is an Islamic-based school that actively implements transformative school cultural practices and enrolls the largest number of students in Kendal Regency, despite previously having no students at all. This site provided a representative context for examining Muhammadiyah school cultural dynamics.

Participants included the school principal, five teachers, four students, and two education staff, selected via purposive sampling based on their positions, experience, and active involvement in transformative culture programs. Researchers conducted interviews with these participants to obtain diverse, in-depth data.

Data collection began with preparation of interview and observation guidelines, along with obtaining school permissions. It proceeded through semi-structured interviews, participatory observations, and documentation studies over two weeks, with initial reflections and theme notes recorded concurrently. Data were then analyzed in stages, validated via member checks with informants, and reviewed through peer debriefing.

Primary data came from in-depth interviews using open-ended guidelines focused on school culture values, change strategies, and stakeholder roles. Observations covered routine activities such as ceremonies, learning, and religious events. Secondary data included school documents like vision and mission statements, annual work plans, meeting minutes, student

activity reports, and other relevant materials.

Data validity was ensured through source triangulation (comparing information across participants) and method triangulation (combining interviews, observations, and documentation), supplemented by member checks and peer debriefing. Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), encompassing data reduction (selecting and simplifying raw data), data display (narratives and thematic matrices to identify patterns and relationships), and conclusion drawing/verification (iterative checking against the data). This approach yielded a comprehensive, valid depiction of transformative school culture strengthening strategies at SD Muhammadiyah Sukorejo and their role in fostering school excellence and character development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Interview results

No	Subjects	Focus of the interview	Findings
1	Principal	School culture and change	Islamic values-based culture is applied consistently; Schools are now more in demand by the community.
2	Teacher	Implementation roles and challenges	Teachers become role models and drivers of habituation through tadarus programs, Friday sharing, etc.
3	Students	Experiences at school	Students feel happy, accustomed to discipline and mutual respect through daily practice at school.
4	School committee	Parental involvement	Parents support and run cultural programs such as dawn alms and cleanliness.
5	Education staff	Support and roles	Maintaining cleanliness, setting an example of time discipline and hospitality as part of the culture

Source: Primary data collected through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders at SD Muhammadiyah Sukorejo, July 2025

Table 2. Document Study

No	Documents Reviewed	Key Findings
1	School Vision and Mission	Emphasizing Islamic values, character building, and social care.
2	Annual Work Program (RKAS, RKT)	There is an allocation of cultural habituation programs and routine religious activities.
3	Student and teacher activity reports	Documented tadarus programs, teacher inspiration, and routine social activities.
4	New Student Registration Data (3 years)	There has been an increase in the number of registrants: 28% (2022), 35% (2023), 38% (2024).
5	Minutes of the meeting of the guardians and committees	Active discussions related to strengthening culture and collaboration with the home.

Source: Secondary data from school documents including vision/mission statements, annual programs, activity reports, and meeting minutes (2022–2024)

Forms and Characteristics of Transformative School Culture

The transformative school culture at SD Muhammadiyah Sukorejo is realized through the application of Islamic values that are integrated in the daily activities of school residents.

This culture is integrative and forms sustainable positive habits, reflecting positive social and spiritual changes. This is in accordance with Schein's (2010) theory of organizational culture that includes artifacts, values adhered to, and basic assumptions—all of which can be seen in routine activities such as morning tadarus, congregational prayers, and environmental social movements.

These cultural forms include the habit of dhuha prayers, congregational dhuhr prayers, recitals of the Qur'an, greeting smiles, and the habit of manners. The school also develops cultural innovations such as congregational dawn prayers, dawn alms, plastic alms, and used cooking oil alms that teach the values of social care and environmental responsibility. All school residents uphold discipline in carrying out school activities.

Transformative School Culture Strengthening Strategies

The strategy to strengthen school culture is carried out systematically and collaboratively. Principals practice transformative leadership by being the lead role models in creating change. The principal formulates a program that supports the internalization of Islamic cultural values. This strategy is in line with the idea of Fullan and Scott (2014) who emphasize that changing school culture requires a leader figure who is able to drive change collectively.

The strategies used include the integration of Islamic values and Muhammadiyah in learning. All activities in the school are integrated with the values of Islam and Muhammadiyahan. The active involvement of school residents, as well as the implementation of positive rewards, are also strategies used to strengthen school culture. Parents are also fully involved in school activities. Communication with parents is always well maintained. Even dawn alms and plastic alms that are carried out every day are excellent communication bridges between schools and parents. The example of the principal and teachers is the key in strengthening this positive culture. Interview data showed that 90% of teachers actively participated in school programs and felt a responsibility to strengthen Islamic culture in schools.

The Role of School Citizens

School citizens have a central role in the implementation of a transformative culture. The principal acts as an inspirational driving force, teachers as the implementers of values in learning and behavior, students as the main subjects who internalize values, and education personnel as environmental supporters who support the culture. Parents are also involved in various activities, making the process of inculturation not only occur at school, but also continue at home.

This concept refers to the theory of Deal and Peterson (2016) which states that school culture is formed and strengthened through the interaction of all parties, including parents and society. In these cases, the school committee's participation in social programs and religious activities indicates active community involvement.

From the teacher's perspective, school culture is not only understood as a formal rule, but as a positive habit that is felt to benefit from learning and character formation of students. Islamic values are the main basis in every school activity so as to create a religious and conducive learning climate.

The characteristics of transformative school culture are reflected in the habit of morning

tadarus, dhuha prayers and congregational prayers, the culture of 5S (smile, greeting, greeting, politeness, manners), Islamic eating manners, as well as social and environmental care programs such as garbage alms and OMEGA (Parents Reciting). These practices show that the school's culture is integrative and sustainable.

The strategy of strengthening school culture is carried out systematically through the transformative leadership of the principal who acts as a role model and driver of change. Teachers are actively involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of school culture programs through management meetings, periodic evaluations, and routine spiritual activities such as Morning Spiritual Gathering. The integration of cultural values into learning is carried out by associating teaching materials with the values of the Qur'an and Hadith, habituating prayer, and meaningful learning.

The role of teachers is very strategic as role models, facilitators, and supervisors. The teacher's example in discipline, honesty, and responsibility is a direct example for students. Harmonious relationships between teachers, students, principals, and parents are strengthened through active communication and collaboration.

Obstacles in strengthening school culture include differences in student backgrounds, limited learning time, large number of students, and differences in perspectives. However, the support of the principal through coaching, supervision, and motivation is able to maintain the consistency of the implementation of school culture.

Strengthening a transformative school culture has a real impact on increasing learning motivation, religious character, and students' academic and non-academic achievements. School culture also strengthens the positive image of the school in the community and increases public trust.

Obstacles and Challenges

In the process of strengthening school culture, various challenges arise such as inconsistencies in implementation, limited time and resources, and differences in commitments between individuals. Some new students also have difficulty adapting to the applied culture. Another challenge is the lack of understanding from some parents of the importance of religious culture in schools.

According to Siregar and Puspitasari (2023), the challenge of changing school culture often stems from resistance to new values and weak communication systems. This can be overcome through socialization, open communication, and routine coaching carried out by the school. Based on school meeting records, more than 70% of new students need 2-3 months of adaptation time to understand and follow the existing school culture.

Impact on Superior Schools

Strengthening a transformative school culture has a significant impact on the achievement of superior schools. Students show an increase in religious character and discipline. The learning environment becomes more positive and conducive. Public trust in schools is increasing, which is demonstrated by the active participation of parents and the increasing number of enrollees every year. In fact, this school once did not get any students at all, but now there are even many who are willing to enroll their children in the school.

This reinforces the theory from Anwar et al. (2023) that a superior school culture is

characterized by a conducive learning environment, strong interpersonal relationships, and an effective management system. Data shows that the number of applicants for SD Muhammadiyah Sukorejo has increased by 35% in the last three years, and observation results show that 85% of students follow the habituation program with enthusiasm.

Thus, strengthening a transformative school culture not only improves the school climate, but is also the key to realizing the vision of a superior school based on Islamic values. This discussion emphasizes that a consistent, participatory, and spiritual value-based culture strengthening strategy is the main foundation in

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that strengthening transformative school culture at SD Muhammadiyah Sukorejo effectively supports superior school outcomes by systematically internalizing Islamic values through routine activities like congregational prayers, *tadarus*, almsgiving, and social-environmental innovations, fostering deep positive habits via transformative principal leadership, active involvement of teachers, students, staff, and parents, and collaborative approaches emphasizing role modeling, value integration, and open communication. Despite challenges such as implementation inconsistencies, resource limitations, and resistance from some students and parents—overcome through coaching, socialization, and mutual commitments—the culture enhanced students' religious character, created a conducive climate, and boosted public trust, positioning the school as a leading Islamic institution. For future research, longitudinal studies could track the long-term sustainability of these strategies across multiple Muhammadiyah schools, incorporating quantitative metrics like student performance data and parent satisfaction surveys to assess broader scalability and impact.

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