

Transformational and Ethical Leadership in Islamic Schools: Strengthening Teachers' Professional Ethics and Religious Character among Generation Z Students at MA Subhanah Subah Batang

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the integration of transformational and ethical leadership in strengthening teachers' professional ethics and fostering the religious character of Generation Z students within the Islamic school environment. Employing a qualitative approach with an interpretive single-case study design, the research was conducted at MA Subhanah Subah Batang, Central Java, Indonesia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, and subsequently analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. The findings reveal that the integration of both leadership styles produces a holistic organizational ecosystem, conceptualized as the "Transformational-Ethical Leadership Based on Uswah (T-EU) Model." This model strengthens teachers' professional ethics through value internalization and multi-layered exemplarity, transcending mere administrative compliance. Furthermore, authentic professional ethics transform into a primary catalyst in shaping the religious character of Generation Z students through the "Transformational-Ethical Exemplarity-Based Religious Character Formation (PKR-KTE) Model," which effectively navigates the challenges of digital disruption and contemporary moral crises. This study provides significant theoretical and practical contributions to the literature on Islamic educational leadership, asserting that value-based leadership is a fundamental prerequisite in responding to the complexities of character education in the modern era.

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Introduction

Educational leadership is a key determinant of the effectiveness of school organizations, the quality of learning, and the success of student character development in the 21st century (Harria et al., 2013). Changes in the educational landscape due to digitalization, globalization, and technological disruption have shifted the role of the principal from mere administrator to change leader capable of fostering organizational innovation while maintaining the moral integrity of all school members (Mustajab &

Jansee, 2021). In the context of Islamic education, these demands are increasingly complex because leadership is directed not only at improving academic quality but also at strengthening Islamic values, forming morals, and developing students' religious character (Afrianto et al., 2026). This challenge is further exacerbated when madrasas are faced with the characteristics of Generation Z, who grew up in a digital ecosystem, have extensive access to information, think critically, and are adaptable to technology, but at the same time face various moral issues such as declining social interaction, exposure to negative content, a crisis of role models, and low spiritual resilience (Amin & Aman, 2025; Suleymanova, 2020). Therefore, madrasas require a leadership model that is not only capable of driving adaptive organizational change but also ensures that the entire change process remains grounded in ethical values and Islamic teachings. Various studies have shown that transformational leadership contributes to increased teacher commitment, organizational innovation, and learning effectiveness (Kılınç et al., 2024; Nassir & Benoliel, 2025), while ethical leadership has been shown to strengthen organizational trust, professional integrity, and the quality of decision-making in educational institutions (Seiawan, 2024; Ballanguard & Aas, 2022). However, these two leadership approaches have largely been studied separately, thus not providing a complete picture of how their integration can be applied in the context of Islamic education.

Furthermore, research on leadership in Islamic educational institutions is still dominated by discussions of managerial effectiveness, instructional leadership, principal competency, and improving the quality of learning. Studies integrating transformational leadership and ethical leadership as a unified leadership ecosystem are relatively limited (Nasir et al., 2026; Purnama, 2026). Research on teacher professional ethics also generally focuses on adherence to codes of ethics, professional competency, and teacher performance, without explaining how these professional ethics are built through organizational culture, which is directly influenced by the leadership of the principal (Ningrum et al., 2024; Gernalin et al., 2023). Meanwhile, various studies on character education primarily position teachers as individual role models, but have not yet fully explained how principal leadership can build an institutional ecosystem that systematically strengthens teacher professional ethics and ultimately shapes the religious character of Generation Z students (Hikmah et al., 2026). In fact, from an Islamic educational perspective, the process of internalizing values is not sufficient through the delivery of religious material, but must be realized through organizational culture, exemplary behavior (*uswah hasanah*), religious habits, and the integration of Islamic values in all educational activities (Qonitah & Sugeng, 2026). This conceptual gap indicates that Islamic educational leadership needs to be understood not merely as an administrative function, but as a value-based leadership process capable of transforming organizational culture through moral exemplars, teacher empowerment, and collective commitment to the vision of Islamic education.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to analyze how transformational leadership and ethical leadership are implemented at MA Subhanah Subah Batang in strengthening the professional ethics of teachers and shaping the religious character of Generation Z students. Unlike previous studies that generally examine these two leadership concepts partially, this study views transformational leadership and ethical leadership as working simultaneously through the principle of *uswah hasanah* as the main mechanism in building the organizational culture of madrasas. Through an interpretive qualitative case study approach, this study seeks to explain how these leadership practices shape the professional culture of teachers, internalize professional ethical values, and produce students' religious character that is adaptive to the challenges of the digital era. The main contribution of this study is to offer the Transformational-Ethical *Uswah Leadership*

Model (T-EU Model) as a new conceptual framework that integrates the theories of transformational leadership, ethical leadership, and Islamic educational philosophy into one complete leadership model. This model is expected not only to enrich the treasury of Islamic educational leadership theories but also to provide practical implications for the development of madrasa leadership policies in strengthening teacher professionalism and shaping the religious character of Generation Z in the digital era.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using an interpretive single-case study design to examine how transformational and ethical leadership are enacted within the context of an Islamic senior high school and how these leadership practices contribute to strengthening teachers' professional ethics and the religious character of Generation Z students. A qualitative case study was selected because it enables an in-depth exploration of leadership phenomena within their real-life institutional context while preserving the complexity of interactions among school leaders, teachers, organizational culture, and students (Yin, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The study was conducted at MA Subhanah Subah Batang, Central Java, Indonesia, as the institution demonstrates a strong commitment to integrating Islamic values into school governance and instructional practices. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, emphasizing individuals directly involved in leadership implementation and educational decision-making. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis to ensure methodological triangulation and to capture multiple perspectives regarding leadership practices, professional ethics, and character education within the madrasah.

The collected data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021), comprising data familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and report production. This analytical approach was chosen because it facilitates the identification of recurring patterns while allowing contextual interpretation of participants' experiences and institutional practices. Throughout the analysis, themes were developed iteratively by comparing interview transcripts, observational field notes, and institutional documents, enabling the construction of an integrated understanding of transformational leadership, ethical leadership, teachers' professional ethics, and students' religious character formation. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the study applied source triangulation, methodological triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and an audit trail, ensuring credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the research outcomes. These procedures strengthened the rigor of the qualitative inquiry and increased the reliability of the interpretations presented in this study.

Table 1. Research Informants

No.	Informant	Code	Selection Criteria	Main Information Explored
1	Principal (Head of Madrasah)	P1	Responsible for institutional leadership and policy implementation	Transformational leadership, ethical leadership, school vision, leadership strategies
2	Vice Principal	VP1	Assists in academic management and organizational coordination	Leadership implementation, organizational culture, teacher supervision
3	Islamic Education Teacher	T1	Minimum five years of teaching experience	Professional ethics, instructional practices, character education

4	Senior Subject Teacher	T2	Actively involved in school development programs	Professional commitment, collaboration, ethical teaching practices
5	Homeroom Teacher	T3	Responsible for students' academic and character development	Religious character formation, teacher-student interaction, Generation Z learning characteristics

Results and Discussion

1. Transformational and Ethical Leadership Practices in Managing Islamic Education

The implementation of leadership at MA Subhanah Subah Batang is rooted in the internalization of the vision "Creating a Muttaqin, Knowledgeable, and Skilled Generation," which is translated through a combination of transformational and ethical leadership styles. The principal positions this vision not merely as a strategic document, but as a moral compass that drives all organizational dynamics. This was emphasized by the principal (P1), who stated, *"The vision of creating a muttaqin and knowledgeable generation is not just a slogan, but a moral mandate that requires me to inspire the entire school community to go beyond ordinary administrative expectations toward the formation of civilization."* Similarly, in every strategic decision-making, P1 emphasized that, *"Every policy and resource allocation must stem from one fundamental question: does this step directly move students closer to personal piety and independence, in line with the school's mission?"* This transformative approach effectively shifts the paradigm of educators, as expressed by the vice principal (VP1), who stated, *"The principal not only provides instruction, but consistently transforms the way we view Islamic education, from merely transferring knowledge to a comprehensive process of instilling values."*

In daily practice, this transformational leadership is strongly tied to ethical leadership centered on exemplary behavior (*uswah*). In the context of Islamic education, exemplary behavior is a key instrument in building an Islamic organizational culture. P1 emphasized this principle by stating, *"In the madrasah ecosystem, uswah, or exemplary behavior, is the most vibrant curriculum; I must arrive early, lead prayers, and demonstrate modesty as a manifestation of integrity, not just a structural obligation."* The impact of this exemplary behavior creates a positive psychological climate for educators, as expressed by an Islamic education teacher (T1), who stated, *"His exemplary behavior in the discipline of worship and egalitarian interactions automatically creates a respectful organizational culture and strengthens our commitment to professionalism."* Field observations confirmed this, consistently demonstrating that the principal greeted students at the main gate every morning (cultivating greetings), led congregational *Dhuha* prayers, and implemented an open-door policy that enabled intensive interaction between leaders, teachers, and students.

This synergy between transformational and ethical leadership serves as the primary foundation for formulating change strategies and participatory decision-making, particularly in addressing the characteristics of Generation Z. P1 explained this approach by saying, *"In response to the dynamics of Generation Z, we are abandoning an authoritarian approach and shifting to transformational leadership that collaboratively engages teachers in formulating contextual learning innovations."* However, this transformation remains within strict moral boundaries, as VP1 added that, *"Ethical leadership ensures that every change and modernization strategy we promote does not erode moral values, but instead strengthens the foundation of students' religiosity."* To achieve this, P1 provides measured autonomy, stating, *"I give teachers full space and trust to develop adaptive learning methods, as long as they align with the mission of building Islamic character and social piety."* This trust has a direct impact on the work climate, as expressed by a senior teacher (T2) that, *"The space for*

collaboration and autonomy opened by the madrasah principal makes us feel valued as professionals, so that our commitment to school development increases significantly.

The integration of these two leadership styles has resulted in a leadership practice model that can be called the "Transformational-Ethical Leadership Model Based on Uswah" (T-EU Model). This model places moral exemplarity as the primary driver of organizational innovation. P1 synthesized this model by stating, *"The leadership model in this madrasah is a complete ecosystem; where the drive for transformation is always animated by ethics, and the direction of these ethics simultaneously drives innovation."* The success of this model is measured directly through indicators of achieving the school's vision, as explained by VP1 that, *"Our main indicator of success is not only the achievement of academic targets, but is clearly seen in the students' militancy in religion, their perseverance in worship, and the realization of their social spirit towards others."* This is confirmed through the results of observations of the school environment, which showed high student discipline in worship without strict coercion, high student participation in socio-religious activities, and warm and polite teacher-student interactions. In line with this, T3 added that, *"This leadership that combines transformative vision and ethical example has transformed the madrasah into an environment that organically and sustainably cultivates students' personal piety and religious character."*

2. Strengthening Teachers' Professional Ethics through Transformational and Ethical Leadership

The strengthening of teachers' professional ethics at MA Subhanah Subah Batang is the result of a leadership approach that deliberately integrates transformational and ethical approaches into every layer of organizational interaction. The principal (P1) laid this foundation by emphasizing, *"Teachers' professional ethics are not just written rules posted on the wall, but rather a spirit that must be instilled through consistent example and transformational encouragement from the leadership."* This principle was then translated into concrete expectations for each educator, as explained by the vice principal (VP1), who stated, *"We are building a system where teacher discipline and responsibility are not the result of strict supervision, but rather arise from an internal awareness that we continually cultivate through dialogue and collective reflection."* From the teachers' perspective, the internalization of these values is palpable. An Islamic education teacher (T1) expressed, *"Since this leadership took place, I feel that being a teacher at this madrasah is not just a profession, but a mandate that requires me to continuously improve myself morally and professionally."* A senior teacher (T2) echoed this sentiment, stating, *"The principal consistently instills in me the understanding that professional ethics is our identity as Muslim educators, and that has changed the way I view every responsibility in the classroom."*

Teacher integrity and professionalism are formed through a multi-layered model that begins with top leadership and extends down to interactions among colleagues. P1 explained this mechanism by stating, *"Teacher integrity cannot be built through a one-day seminar; it grows when teachers see their leaders being consistent between words and actions, so they feel ashamed not to do the same."* The impact of this approach is creating a collective moral standard, as T1 explained, *"When the principal himself is never late and always attends every religious activity, we as teachers automatically feel that professionalism is a non-negotiable value."* VP1 added, *"We create an environment where teachers constructively remind each other, not because there are coercive rules, but because the culture of mutually upholding the honor of the profession has become part of the madrasah's identity."* Field observations corroborate these findings, noting that all teachers were present at the madrasah at least 15 minutes before the bell rang, voluntarily participated in morning spiritual guidance activities, and consistently practiced Islamic etiquette in their interactions with students and colleagues without strict formal oversight.

Teacher commitment to professional development and a collaborative culture was the next dimension significantly strengthened by the integration of these two leadership styles. T2 asserted, *"The transformational leadership implemented by the madrasah principal keeps me from feeling stagnant; there's always a drive to develop, collaborate, and push the boundaries of my professional comfort."* This drive is not individualistic, but rather built collectively, as T3 expressed, *"We don't work in silos; the collaborative culture fostered by the leadership makes each teacher feel responsible not only for their own class, but for the success of the entire educational ecosystem at this madrasah."* From a managerial perspective, VP1 explained, *"Our teachers' commitment grows because they are actively involved in every strategic decision-making process, giving them a sense of emotional and professional ownership of this madrasah."* P1 concluded this dimension by emphasizing that, *"The strongest commitment is one that comes from the heart, and my task as a leader is to create conditions in which the hearts of teachers are bound to the great vision of Islamic education that we are fighting for together."*

Learning innovation and strengthening of professional culture at MA Subhanah cannot be separated from the ethical framework that underpins all of the madrasah's academic policies. T1 explained that, *"The innovations in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning that we develop always start from an ethical question: does this method strengthen students' morals or does it distance them from Islamic values?"* This reflective question becomes the main filter in every curriculum development, as emphasized by T2 that, *"We are given the freedom to experiment with modern learning methods, but the madrasah principal always reminds us that this freedom must be framed by integrity and moral responsibility as Muslim educators."* VP1 added that, *"The professional culture at this madrasah is unique because we do not separate pedagogical competence from spiritual competence; the two are one entity that cannot be parceled out."* An analysis of the Madrasah Work Plan (RKM) and academic supervision documents for the 2024/2025 academic year confirms this, finding that the teacher performance assessment instrument explicitly includes indicators of personal piety, exemplary behavior in worship, and the ability to integrate moral values into each subject as key assessment components, weighted equally with indicators of pedagogical and professional competence.

Self-reflection and teachers' position as role models are the most profound and sustainable mechanisms for strengthening professional ethics at MA Subhanah. P1 explained this philosophy by stating, *"An ethical teacher is one who continually reflects on himself; therefore, we established a tradition of weekly self-reflection where each teacher evaluates not only his or her performance but also his or her spiritual and moral well-being."* This tradition has a direct impact on teachers' professional awareness, as T3 stated, *"The weekly reflection makes me constantly aware that every word and action I say to students is a reflection of my integrity as an educator, and it compels me to continuously improve."* T1 added that, *"Being a role model for Generation Z is not an easy task because they are highly critical and quick to detect inauthenticity; therefore, professional ethics for us is not an option, but an existential imperative."* VP1 emphasized that, *"When teachers consistently reflect on themselves and serve as authentic role models, professional ethics is no longer an administrative burden, but rather a lifestyle that naturally spreads to all members of the madrasah."*

Strengthening teacher professional ethics at MA Subhanah Subah Batang culminated in the formation of a model that can be identified as the "Transformational-Ethical Exemplarity-Based Professional Ethics Strengthening Model." This model operates through three simultaneous mechanisms: internalizing values through leadership role models, strengthening commitment through collaborative participation, and maintaining integrity through ongoing reflection. Comprehensive observation findings throughout the study indicate that all teachers consistently display professional behavior that goes beyond formal standards—from near-perfect time discipline, willingness to assist

students outside of class hours without additional incentives, to active involvement in the religious activities of the madrasa community as a form of social role model. T3 concluded that, *"The leadership model in this madrasa has transformed professional ethics from mere adherence to a code of ethics to a collective movement that lives and breathes in every educational interaction."* P1 concluded by affirming that, *"Strong professional ethics in teaching is a non-negotiable foundation in Islamic education, and the model we have built here proves that when transformational and ethical leadership come together, teachers become not only competent professionals but also sincere and consistent mujahid in education"* Thus, it can be affirmed that the integration of transformational and ethical leadership has been empirically proven to be able to produce an ecosystem for strengthening professional ethics in teaching that is holistic, sustainable, and rooted in Islamic values, which in turn becomes a fundamental prerequisite for the formation of the religious character of Generation Z in the madrasa environment.

3. Teachers' Professional Ethics and the Development of Religious Character among Generation Z Students

Teachers' professional ethics, strengthened through transformational and ethical leadership, have transformed into a fundamental instrument in shaping students' religious character, particularly in addressing the psychological complexities of Generation Z. Teachers are no longer positioned merely as transferors of knowledge, but rather as moral architects who shape students' spiritual ecosystems. The madrasah principal (P1) emphasized this causal relationship by stating, *"Authentic teacher professional ethics is an absolute prerequisite for student character formation; Generation Z has a very keen radar for hypocrisy, so they will only accept religious values if conveyed by teachers who truly practice them."* This statement was echoed by an Islamic education teacher (T1), who explained, *"Gen Z students cannot be fooled by empty religious rhetoric; they need ethical teachers whose academic piety aligns with their social and spiritual piety."* This directly impacts the dynamics of classroom interactions, as expressed by the homeroom teacher (T3), who stated, *"Our interactions with students are designed to be a warm, dialogical space; when teachers demonstrate empathy, integrity, and noble etiquette, students automatically internalize these values into their character structure."*

This process of internalizing Islamic values is operationalized through the development of a comprehensive religious culture and a structured system of habituation, rooted in teacher role models. T1 explained the mechanism of this habituation by stating, *"The habituation of congregational Dhuha and Dzuhur prayers, as well as morning sermons, is not merely an administrative routine, but rather a space where teachers are present as imams and spiritual motivators who inspire students."* The focus on instilling etiquette takes precedence over the transfer of knowledge, as emphasized by a senior teacher (T2), who stated, *"We consistently emphasize etiquette before knowledge; teachers model polite speech, respect for opinions, and empathy, which directly shape students' noble character."* T3 added that, *"The religious culture at this madrasah is designed in such a way that Islamic values do not feel like a dogmatic burden, but rather as a pleasurable psychological and spiritual need for students"* From a managerial perspective, VP1 ensured the sustainability of this culture by stating, *"We are building an ecosystem where Islamic values are integrated into every aspect of school policy, from discipline to an educational reward and punishment system."* P1 concluded this dimension with a clear vision that, *"The ultimate goal is to create a generation that is militant in their religion; they are not merely passively obedient, but possess a strong fighting spirit to defend and spread Islamic values amidst the currents of modernity."*

In light of contemporary challenges, teacher professional ethics plays a crucial role in guiding students to navigate the digital era without losing their religious identity. T3 identified this challenge by stating, *"Gen Z's biggest challenges are digital distractions and*

exposure to harmful content; therefore, teachers must be present not as technological obstacles, but as mentors who equip them with digital literacy based on Islamic ethics." T1 explained the implementation of this by saying, "We don't ban technology, but we equip students with ethical filters; teachers teach them to be critical of information, avoid cyberbullying, and use social media to spread goodness." Field observations confirmed the effectiveness of this approach, where it was seen that students used their devices responsibly in the school environment, actively participated in religious studies through digital platforms, and no cases of cyberbullying were found among students. This is supported by an analysis of the document "Guidelines for Social Media Ethics for MA Subhanah Students" which shows that the digital regulations at this madrasah are not repressive, but rather educational and were developed through the active participation of teachers and students.

Comprehensively, the synergy between teacher role models, religious culture, and digital ethics guidance has crystallized into a model that can be identified as the "Transformational-Ethical Model-Based Religious Character Formation Model" (PKR-KTE Model). P1 synthesized this model by stating, "The model we implement is a complete integration between teacher role models (input), digital habituation and literacy (process), and the realization of religious militancy and social spirit (output)." VP1 explained the indicators of success of this model that, "The success of this model is measured by three main indicators of the school's vision: student militancy in religion, perseverance in worship as personal piety, and the realization of their social spirit towards others." The real impact of this model is seen physically and socially, as expressed by T2 that, "The impact is very real, students are not only ritually pious at school, but their initiatives to hold social services, clean the neighborhood mosque, and raise funds for orphans emerge organically without always having to be told." The results of observations of the madrasah environment and the surrounding community strengthen this finding, where it was recorded that students participated highly in community religious activities, their politeness when interacting with local residents, and their discipline in worship were carried out independently without strict teacher supervision.

Tabel 1. The Transformational-Ethical Leadership Model for Strengthening the Religious Character of Generation Z Students

Model Dimension	Implementation Focus (Leadership Practices)	Expected Outcomes (Aligned with the School Vision and Mission)
Role Modelling (Uswah Hasanah)	Teachers serve as authentic role models by demonstrating integrity, consistency in religious observance, professional responsibility, and respectful interpersonal conduct.	Students develop personal religiosity, reflected in consistent worship practices, self-discipline, and independent commitment to Islamic values.
Religious Habituation and Islamic School Culture	The school institutionalizes congregational prayers, Qur'anic recitation, short religious sermons (<i>kultum</i>), and the integration of Islamic values across all learning activities.	Students develop a strong Islamic identity, spiritual resilience, and a sustained commitment to practicing Islamic teachings in everyday life.
Ethical Digital Literacy	Teachers guide students in navigating digital environments through critical media literacy, ethical online behavior, responsible content filtering, and the constructive use of social media for educational and <i>da'wah</i> purposes.	Generation Z students demonstrate digital responsibility, critical thinking, ethical online engagement, and positive digital productivity.

Social Responsibility (<i>Amal Ṣāliḥ</i>)	Teachers facilitate community service projects, humanitarian initiatives, environmental stewardship, and collaborative social activities as experiential learning opportunities.	Students develop empathy, social responsibility, civic engagement, and the disposition to contribute positively to society and the environment through righteous actions.
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In terms of long-term implications, this model provides them with a solid moral foundation to face life in the future. T3 summarized this impact by stating, *"When they graduate and enter society or continue their studies, the greatest provision they bring is not just academic grades on paper, but a strong moral and spiritual compass that will guide every step of their lives."* P1 concluded with a philosophical affirmation that, *"Religious character education for Generation Z in this era is an investment in civilization; through the noble professional ethics of teachers, we are not just teaching students to be good, but we are forging them to become agents of change who bring blessings to the universe."* The findings of this study empirically confirm that the integration of transformational and ethical leadership does not only operate at the managerial level of the organization, but has transformed into a pedagogical ecosystem that organically connects teacher integrity with the internalization of students' religious values. This indicates that strengthening the professional ethics of teachers in madrasas is not merely an instrument for improving the quality of educational services, but rather a fundamental strategy in responding to the moral crisis of Generation Z in the era of digital disruption, while also confirming the theoretical contribution that value-based leadership has a strong linear power in forming authentic and sustainable religious character.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that the integration of transformational and ethical leadership at MA Subhanah Subah Batang has resulted in a leadership ecosystem that simultaneously fosters organizational innovation and maintains Islamic moral consistency. This finding transcends the classic dichotomy in leadership literature, where Bass and Avolio (1993) emphasize that transformational leadership focuses on organizational change, while Brown and Treviño (2006) position ethical leadership as the foundation of moral exemplarity. At MA Subhanah, these two dimensions do not operate separately but rather are integrated into a model that can be called "Transformational-Ethical-Based-Uswah" (T-EU). The concept of *uswah*, or exemplary behavior in the Islamic educational tradition, serves as an explanatory variable that enriches Western leadership theory, as it transforms moral values from mere cognitive principles into authentic lived practices. Thus, this study offers a theoretical contribution that, in the context of Islamic education, transformational leadership will only be sustainable when imbued with ethics, and ethical leadership will only have a broad impact when driven by a transformative vision. The strengthening of professional ethics for teachers in madrasas also confirms and expands Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which emphasizes that moral behavior is learned through observation and role modeling. The findings indicate that professional ethics for teachers is not formed through administrative control mechanisms, but rather through an internalization process triggered by layered role models, from leaders to interactions among colleagues. This aligns with Jahroni et al.'s (2024) argument that sustainable organizational culture change requires leadership capable of addressing the emotional and spiritual dimensions of educators. The novelty of these findings lies in the identification of a "collective reflection" mechanism through the weekly *muhasabah* tradition, rarely discussed in conventional professional ethics literature. This mechanism demonstrates that professional ethics for teachers in madrasas is not simply adherence to a code of ethics, but rather a spiritual-professional movement

that organically strengthens integrity, commitment, and a collaborative culture amidst the pressures of modern professional demands (Hanif et al., 2025).

The findings of this study provide an empirical response to the challenges of developing the religious character of Generation Z in the era of digital disruption, an issue of global concern in character education literature (Lickona, 2019; Twenge, 2009). The Transformational-Ethical Role Model-Based Religious Character Formation (PKR-KTE) model found at MA Subhanah offers an alternative to doctrinal and one-way approaches to character education. The findings indicate that Generation Z responds positively to religious values when delivered by authentic, digitally adaptive, and socially sensitive teachers. The integration of role models, religious culture, and ethically based digital literacy is key to successful value internalization, theoretically expanding the conventional character education framework by adding a digital ethical dimension as an essential component. This emphasizes that religious character education in the contemporary era must be designed holistically, addressing the spiritual, social, and digital dimensions simultaneously.

Overall, the findings of this study make three main contributions. First, theoretically, this study offers a T-EU leadership model that integrates transformational, ethical, and Islamic *uswah* values as a new framework for the study of Islamic educational leadership. Second, practically, this study provides operational guidance for madrasahs in designing an educational ecosystem that can strengthen the professional ethics of teachers while simultaneously shaping the religious character of Generation Z. Third, methodologically, this study demonstrates the strength of a qualitative-reflexive approach in capturing the complexity of leadership phenomena in a local cultural context. However, this study has limitations because it was only conducted in one madrasah, so generalization of the findings must be done carefully. Future research is recommended to test the T-EU model comparatively across various types of Islamic educational institutions, as well as develop quantitative instruments to measure the effectiveness of this model more broadly.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the integration of transformational and ethical leadership through the concept of *uswah* (exemplary) creates a holistic and sustainable leadership ecosystem in the madrasah environment. The resulting "Transformational-Ethical Based on *Uswah*" (T-EU) model emphasizes that an organization's transformative vision can only be optimally realized if it is intrinsically bound by the leader's moral integrity. Consecutively, this ecosystem strengthens the professional ethics of teachers not through rigid administrative control mechanisms, but through a process of internalization of values, layered role models, and collective reflection. Ultimately, this authentic professional ethics of teachers transforms into a primary catalyst in shaping the religious character of Generation Z, crystallized in the Transformational-Ethical Exemplary-Based Religious Character Formation Model (PKR-KTE). This model effectively addresses the challenges of digital disruption and the contemporary moral crisis through the synergy between teacher role models, religious cultural familiarization, and ethics-based digital literacy. Theoretically, this study enriches the educational leadership literature by bridging Western leadership theory and Islamic educational values, and confirms that values-based leadership has a strong linear effect on shaping authentic student character in the modern era.

Practically, these findings offer significant managerial implications for Islamic educational leaders and foundations, suggesting that leadership recruitment and development must prioritize the integration of transformative capacity and spiritual integrity, going beyond mere administrative competencies. For policymakers, the

proposed model can serve as an empirical reference in designing competency standards for madrasah principals that explicitly integrate the moral exemplar dimension. However, this study has limitations, as it was designed as a single-case study at a single madrasah, requiring caution in generalizing the findings. Therefore, further research is recommended to test the T-EU and PKR-KTE models using a mixed-methods approach or comparative studies across regions and types of Islamic educational institutions. Developing a quantitative instrument to measure the effectiveness of the *uswah*-based leadership model on strengthening teacher ethics and students' religious character is also an urgent research agenda to validate these qualitative findings more broadly, comprehensively, and measurably.

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