

Faith and Flux: Visionary Leadership, Tech Integration, and the Transformation of Character-Based School Culture

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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.33650/al-tanzim.v10i3.12407>

Received: 11 August 2025

Revised: 22 April 2026

Accepted: 30 April 2026

Abstract:

This study aims to analyze how leadership grounded in religious values, along with the use of technology, contributes to creating a productive, innovative, and character-based school culture. The method used is a qualitative case study design, with in-depth interviews with the principal, vice principal, and teachers as the primary data source. Data analysis was conducted thematically using an inductive coding approach to identify emerging patterns. The results show that applying religious values in visionary leadership not only strengthens integrity, discipline, and empathy among students and teachers but also fosters a school culture grounded in moral values. Furthermore, integrating technology into learning supports innovation and improves the quality of education. However, challenges related to the digital divide and the need for teacher training must be addressed to maximize technology's potential. This study confirms that leadership grounded in religious values and the use of technology can create a more inclusive, adaptive, and sustainable education system. These findings indicate the need for an integrative strategy that digitally strengthens faith-based character education, enhances teachers' capacity as ethical digital role models, and encourages ongoing collaboration between schools and families to support student character development.

Keywords: *Visionary Leadership, Religion, Technology, Accountability, Education Transformation*

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana kepemimpinan yang berlandaskan nilai-nilai keagamaan, serta pemanfaatan teknologi, berperan dalam menciptakan budaya sekolah yang produktif, inovatif, dan berkarakter. Metode yang digunakan adalah pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus, menggunakan wawancara mendalam dengan kepala sekolah, wakil kepala sekolah, dan guru sebagai sumber data utama. Analisis data dilakukan secara tematis dengan pendekatan pengkodean induktif untuk mengidentifikasi pola-pola yang muncul. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penerapan nilai-nilai keagamaan dalam kepemimpinan visioner tidak hanya memperkuat integritas, disiplin, dan empati di kalangan siswa dan guru, tetapi juga membentuk budaya sekolah yang berlandaskan nilai moral. Selain itu, integrasi teknologi dalam pembelajaran mendukung inovasi dan meningkatkan kualitas pendidikan. Namun, tantangan terkait kesenjangan digital dan kebutuhan pelatihan guru perlu diatasi untuk memaksimalkan potensi teknologi. Studi ini menegaskan bahwa kepemimpinan yang berlandaskan nilai keagamaan dan pemanfaatan teknologi dapat menciptakan sistem

pendidikan yang lebih inklusif, adaptif, dan berkelanjutan. Temuan ini menunjukkan perlunya strategi integratif yang memperkuat pendidikan karakter berbasis agama secara digital, meningkatkan kapasitas guru sebagai teladan digital yang etis, serta mendorong kolaborasi berkelanjutan antara sekolah dan keluarga untuk mendukung pengembangan karakter siswa.

Kunci: *Kepemimpinan Visioner, Religius, Teknologi, Akuntabilitas, Transformasi Pendidikan*

Please cite this article in APA style as:

Hambali, M., Muttaqin, M. I., & Efridita, Q. (2026). Faith and Flux: Visionary Leadership, Tech Integration, and the Transformation of Character-Based School Culture. *Al-Tanzim: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam*, 10(3), 837-850.

INTRODUCTION

Developments in the world of education are taking on a new, more dynamic, transparent, and fast-paced character in this era of rapid digital technological advancement (Belle & Chemen, 2025; Tohet et al., 2025). This adds a new constructive force when it is used to support learning through the synergy of exemplary leadership that transforms challenges into opportunities. This phenomenon not only blurs traditional geographical boundaries, but also fundamentally changes the structure of society's values, norms and cultural practices. In this transformative context, educational institutions face pressure to evolve from conventional knowledge-transmission entities into centers for holistic character development, 21st-century competencies, and global competitiveness that are responsive to the demands of the times. Contemporary society, living in a borderless world with unlimited access to information, has shown a significant shift in educational preferences, from ideology- and theologically based considerations towards a rational approach that upholds institutional standards of quality, accountability, and added value.

However, existing research tends to examine religious leadership and digital transformation separately, creating a significant gap in our understanding of how visionary leadership grounded in religious values can be effectively applied in technology-mediated educational systems, particularly in fostering well-rounded personalities within school, home, and community settings (Khaw et al., 2022). This leadership requires working system-based and future-oriented (Imansyah et al., 2025; Sartika et al., 2025; Soim et al., 2026). Two things that are impossible to avoid in every organization are teamwork based on long-term and strategic goals. This approach offers a synergistic integration of spiritual-transcendental principles (such as amanah, uswah hasanah, and honesty) with modern managerial imperatives in educational governance (Septariani, 2024). In parallel, advances in digital technology have become a disruptive force that demands a fundamental reconfiguration of pedagogy. Technology integration is not just the adoption of tools, but the transformation of the learning ecosystem into a more personalized, learner-centered model (Haleem et al., 2022). The synergy of trinity-value-based leadership, transformative technology utilization, and performance-based accountability is a potential catalyst for holistic educational transformation.

SD Unggulan Al-Ya'lu Malang was chosen as the research locus because it represents a unique phenomenon in the implementation of the transformative trilogy. The empirical success of this institution - including the 2016 ICAS gold

medal - raises fundamental research questions: How can the implementation of religious values in visionary leadership, technological synergy, and accountability mechanisms catalyze the transformation of education with superior character in the era of disruption? The academic significance of the research lies in three substantive contributions: the development of a transformational-religious leadership model, the provision of an integrative framework for education quality assurance systems, and the mapping of operationalization strategies for technology-religious value synergy as a catalyst for pedagogical innovation.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative case study design to analyze the implementation of religious values in educational leadership at SD Unggulan Al-Ya'lu Malang, East Java, Indonesia. The case study approach is selected to enable an in-depth, contextually grounded exploration of complex social phenomena, particularly how religiously value-based leadership is enacted and integrated within specific institutional and cultural settings. Based on Creswell's guidelines, this design enables a holistic understanding of participants' experiences, practices, and interactions in real-world contexts. This research aims to understand phenomena in their natural context, focusing on the in-depth interpretation of participants' experiences. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the principal, vice principal, and several teachers. The interviews were conducted using a semistructured approach to allow participants to convey their perceptions and empirical findings freely and to ensure alignment with the research objectives. The interviews included questions about the role of leadership in instilling religious values, exemplary leadership, and its impact on student character development and school culture.

Data analysis was conducted using the thematic approach outlined by Miles et al. (2020), with inductive coding of the interview transcripts to identify key patterns and themes. This process involved several cycles of coding to gain a deeper and more detailed understanding of the phenomenon under study. Miles et al. highlighted the importance of an iterative coding process to ensure that the data reflected the full context and meaning. Once the main themes were identified, they were analyzed in the context of the theory of visionary leadership and the principles of education grounded in religious values, technology, accountability, structure, and reward systems, as outlined in the relevant literature.

To increase the research's validity, data triangulation was conducted by comparing interview results with field observations. As suggested by Miles et al. (2020), this triangulation process helps enrich understanding and ensure the reliability of the analysis results. Observations focused on the application of religious values by the principal and teaching staff, such as the use of calligraphy of Qur'anic verses in classrooms and the routine holding of religious activities, to identify the relationship between theory and practice in the field. Field notes obtained from these observations were also used to add depth to the analysis of the influence of religious values-based school culture.

In the data analysis approach, this study followed the guidelines offered by Miles et al. (2020), which include the stages of data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involves selecting,

categorizing, and focusing on relevant data to answer research questions. In contrast, data presentation takes the form of thematic narratives that describe the relationships among the variables identified. Thus, this study provides a holistic picture of how religious values can shape effective leadership in education and create a school culture that supports student character development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Based on the findings of this study, leadership grounded in religious values, combined with the use of technology, can foster a school culture that is productive, innovative, and character-building; this requires a specific approach consisting of:

Implementation of Religious Values in Educational Leadership

In an interview with the Principal, Wiyanto, he emphasized the importance of Islamic values in school leadership. According to him, visionary leadership must begin with an example that reflects Islamic values such as compassion, trustworthiness, and honesty. This is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The Values of Visionary Leadership

Insertion of visionary leadership values	Description of leadership personification
The value of exemplary	As one of the administrators at this elementary school, we have a responsibility to improve educational services for the children. Since the children's parents have entrusted their children to our institution, this means we are accountable not only to people, but more fundamentally to Allah SWT. ...Therefore, we work together with the team of vice principals, arrive at school on time, and set a good example. (Wiyanto, personal communication, October 2010)
The value of compassion	"As a leader, it is a must to provide direction and guidance for PBM activities, as well as giving attention to weak points in learning, whether it is in the teacher or the student" (Wiyanto, personal communication, October 2010).
The value of trust	"We as principals are not just managers who only organize and maintain, but more fundamentally we are leaders, which is trustworthy and professional, which means having integrity." (Wiyanto, personal communication, October 2010)
The value of honesty	"Teachers' self-worth is important when they can show examples of learning activities that proceed naturally, thankfully becoming an inspiration of honesty or integrity for school members" (Wiyanto, personal communication, October 2010).

This interview reflects how visionary leaders not only give instructions but also become role models in practicing Islamic values. The concept of amanah that is carried here illustrates the integrity of a leader who not only speaks, but also acts in accordance with Islamic teachings that emphasize honesty and responsibility.

In an interview with the Vice Principal, Tutik Arindah, she also emphasized that Islamic values, such as exemplary, compassion, and caring for others, are very

important in educating students and motivating them to excel. Arindah stated that an educational leader must practice Islamic teachings in daily life at school:

Table 2. The Values of Visionary Leadership

Insertion of visionary leadership values	Description of leadership personification
Achievement value	"We are mandated to make this school a place that not only teaches science, but also forms school members who have a spirit of achievement character both in academic and non- academic fields based on Islamic religious values, the non- academic aspect is embedded in the activities of science debate competitions, foreign language skills, Mandarin, sports will affect the whole personality." (T. Arindah, personal communication, May 2010).
The value of caring	"Hygiene activities for ourselves and around the school are routinely instilled from the time we enter the school, until small things become school routines, for example the school yard, classrooms are integrated into learning life in the classroom. Also, character building is based on the excellent values implemented by the institution." (T. Arindah, personal communication, May 2010).

Table 2 shows that leadership at Al-Ya'lu Primary School not only focuses on academic achievement but also on the formation of student character in accordance with Islamic teachings, such as discipline, honesty, and mutual respect.

The Principal also stated that one way to instill religious values is to integrate them into every aspect of school activities. Each classroom and office is adorned with calligraphy of Qur'anic verses and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, which provide inspiration to teachers and students in their daily activities. The approaches that can be used are as follows:

Table 3. Implanting Religious Values in The School Community

Importance of Religious Beliefs in Schools	Supporting Evidence (Interview)
Religious values through the use of a habit-forming approach by school leaders	In every corner of the school, there are writings of Qur'anic verses and Prophetic traditions that remind students to maintain morals and ethics in every activity." (Wiyanto, October 2010)
Character development through activities outside of academics.	"We strive to instill in our students the understanding that, in addition to academic achievement, they must also be good, honest, and caring people, as taught in Islam—a principle we put into practice during major Islamic holidays through activities such as parades, religious study sessions, community service, and charitable donations to those in need." (T. Arindah, personal interview, May 2010).

Based on the interview results of the principal and vice principal in Table 3, the school not only teaches science but also strengthens religious values in the character building of students and teachers. During the interview, the Vice Principal, Tutik Arindah, also said that education at Al- Ya'lu Unggulan Elementary School not only teaches academic material but also character building based on Islamic teachings. According to Arindah, this shows that not only

teaching worldly knowledge but also the importance of religious education can shape students' character to become individuals who are beneficial to society.

The Paradigm of Exemplary Leadership as a Catalyst for Change

Exemplary leadership is one of the main pillars in shaping a healthy and productive organizational culture, especially in the context of education. Visionary leadership, which includes the ability to provide clear direction and to serve as a catalyst for positive change, relies heavily on the example set by leaders at every level of the organization. In the primary school, the principal and vice-principal play a crucial role in collectively inspiring the entire school community to realize the institution's vision.

The principal, Wiyanto, revealed that leaders must set an example for the whole school community to follow. As the central figure in the educational institution, the principal not only gives instructions but also carries out actions that reflect the values to be implemented in the school, as shown in Table 4, on how to instill exemplary behavior.

Table 4. Embedding Exemplary Values

Exemplary Direction	Description of Principal's Exemplary Behavior
A leader is like a mother hen who protects her chicks	"A leader is likened to a mother who embraces her children to provide comfort, warmth, and care." (Wiyanto, personal communication, October 2010).
Leader and manager character	"We as principals are not just managers who only organize and maintain, but more fundamentally, we are leaders who are far-sighted about benefits, innovations, and changes, who can maintain trust and professionalism, which means having integrity." (Wiyanto, personal communication, October 2010).

The principal understands the importance of the leader's role as an effective model who not only regulates but also provides behavioral standards in daily life at school. The principal, as a role model, also emphasizes that integrity is the currency of effective leadership. A leader must not only be able to lead professionally but also set examples in all aspects, whether in school management, decision-making, or interpersonal relationships with staff and students. This example of integrity creates a transparent and accountable environment, where every member of the school feels motivated to follow the leader's example in every aspect of their work.

The vice principal, Tutik Arindah, revealed that continuing studies to a higher level is part of the commitment to improve the quality of leadership in educational institutions. In this case, the example shown through further studies not only enhances the leader's personal capacity but also inspires all staff members to continue developing and adapting to the demands of the times.

Table 5. Cultivation of Exemplary Values

Exemplary direction	Description of exemplary behavior Vice-principal
Educational standards for leaders	"I continued my studies to a higher level motivated by the desire to progress. Educational institutions are service businesses that are required to improve themselves and quality management is needed." (T. Arindah, personal communication, May 2010) .

Visionary leader

"I try to articulate the vision of the school to be superior to what is already superior through work and achievement." (M. Astuti, personal communication, April 23, 2010)

Principals and teachers collaborate to build a culture of achievement through direct role modeling, such as guiding students in academic and non-academic competitions. Visionary school leaders act as primary motivators, not only providing direction but also leading by example, demonstrating integrity and commitment to a shared vision. Through the exemplary behavior of the principal and his/her deputy, an environment supportive of academic and non-academic development is created.

Building a Culture of Achievement in Educational Institutions for Educational Innovation

Merit-based reward systems play a crucial role in fostering a culture of achievement in educational institutions. At Al-Ya'lu Malang Elite Elementary School, recognition is not only based on academic achievement but also acknowledges efforts in self-development, dedication, and contributions to the school's vision and mission. This study demonstrates that implementing such a recognition system effectively motivates the school community – both students and teachers – to achieve excellence, thereby supporting the realization of the school's shared vision, mission, and goals.

The principal of Al-Ya'lu Elite Elementary School in Malang, Purnomosidi, stated that the school's academic achievements are the result of a high-performing ecosystem continuously nurtured by teachers. He noted that participation in the National Science Olympiad (NSO) reflects consistent performance, with achievements in Science and Mathematics from 2021 to 2022, and continued success in 2025 after the pandemic. Furthermore, the school implements differentiated incentives – such as savings, laptops, and opportunities for further study – to motivate outstanding teachers and recognize their professionalism and dedication.

Table 6. Appreciation for School Members

Leader	Culture of achievement
Principal	<p>Grateful for this achievement. In his view, this success is the result of the outstanding ecosystem that has been continuously developed within the school environment." (Purnomosidi, personal communication, October 2025).</p> <p>"Ms. Ida Paridah, S.Pd.I, received an award from the Bina Insan Mulia Foundation for her success in guiding students in the Madrasah Science Competition (KSM) in the natural sciences category, leading them to win third place at the subdistrict level – an achievement that is expected to motivate further academic excellence in the future.</p>



Vice principal	<p>"As the vice principal for administration and learning facilities, we, along with the teachers, strive to create a beautiful and comfortable environment. This requires a cool learning environment, and of course, a learning environment around the school decorated with beautiful trees and gardens, which adds to the fresh air the children breathe in the morning. For this reason, we received the National Adiwiyata award from the Ministry of Environment in 2019."</p>	
Teacher	<p>"We as competition coordinators strive to gather all the potential of children to create and participate when there is a competition to hone their abilities..... our students have succeeded in eliminating 115 other schools from Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. The category of the competition they participated in was Environmentally Friendly Behavior Innovation, 1st place in the 46th SEAMEO Japan-ESD Award 2023".</p>	

Based on the interview data presented in Table 6, the principal, vice principal, and teachers collaborate to present a vision of excellence through achievements that contribute to the institution's progress. Performance development services are relevant to the respective tasks carried out by educational staff and educators. Rewards can be modeled after academic and non-academic achievements. The commitment of teachers and educational staff to perform better, which, in turn, will impact students' ongoing motivation as they gain new experiences through competitions at the national and international levels.

The teacher contract system approach in schools serves as a binding tool for teachers and other educational staff to improve the quality of their learning. The principal, as a leader, also emphasizes that the work contract between teachers and the school aims to ensure that teachers consistently demonstrate optimal performance. If performance declines, the teacher's contract will not be renewed, highlighting the importance of continuous evaluation in managing the quality of the teaching staff at this school. This demonstrates the principal's responsibility to maintain the quality of education by ensuring that teachers consistently demonstrate commitment and integrity in carrying out their duties.

Discussion

This Islamic educational leadership adopts a transformational-religious leadership paradigm (Septariani, 2024). This approach aligns with the findings of Kulsum & Apriyani (2025), who emphasized that internalizing religious values serves as a moral foundation that strengthens students' life skills and leadership capacity, while simultaneously shaping a positive school culture through modeling values-based behavior (Cinantya et al., 2024). The principal serves as a living curriculum, embodying integrity and trust in every action. This approach encompasses two important pillars: first, Idealized Influence, manifested through

direct role models in decision-making processes and daily interactions; second, Inspirational Motivation, through the integration of religious symbols, such as the calligraphy of Quranic verses and hadiths, in the school environment as reminders of core values (Jakandar et al., 2025). The findings of Nurhayati et al. (2024) support this approach by demonstrating a strong impact: a leadership model that prioritizes a top-down approach—specifically, the value of role modeling that begins with the principal, vice-principal, and teachers, in collaboration with parents.

The strategy for implementing religious values through integrated instillation mechanisms in all aspects of school life. Religious rituals such as congregational prayer (Cinantya et al., 2024; Nurhayati et al., 2024) and Quranic recitation serve as character-building instruments that strengthen discipline and collective spiritual awareness (Kulsum & Apriyani, 2025). Social programs such as charity and social services serve as a means to develop students' social responsibility (Jakandar et al., 2025). Meanwhile, the design of the physical environment containing religious elements serves as a constant moral reminder that strengthens the internalization of values (Cinantya et al., 2024). Holistically (Jakandar et al., 2025). These findings confirm that the internalization of religious values is an empirical framework for holistic educational transformation (Kulsum & Apriyani, 2025; Septariani, 2024). First, faith-based transformative leadership catalyzes the development of a values-based school culture. Second, instilling religious values in school activities is a high-impact practice for holistic character development. Third, an integrated approach that integrates academic and character aspects produces sustainable educational outcomes.

Leadership principles require role models who exemplify the desired behavior within the organization. Leaders who can demonstrate exemplary integrity. This example, in turn, strengthens an open organizational culture conducive to positive change. Musaigwa (2023), Peng et al. (2021), and Aya Hamza et al. (2024) added that leader role models not only strengthen organizational culture but can also transform the situation into a more visionary one. Leaders can manage institutions that have a grand vision. Each leader, regardless of status or position, carries out tasks, whether as principals, vice-principals, or teachers, serving as co-leaders, strengthening synergy and collaboration among all members of the organization in achieving common goals (Ford et al., 2021; Onyekwere et al., 2023).

Meritocracy-based reward systems play a crucial role in motivating students and teachers to excel. Based on findings in the scientific literature, meritocracy-based reward systems have a significant impact on creating a productive, innovative, and collaborative environment in educational institutions (Førland & Roxå, 2024; Medina et al., 2024; Førland & Roxå, 2024; Medina et al., 2024). For example, rewards such as professional recognition and career development opportunities are effective in improving the quality of work and dedication of teaching staff (Mendina, 2024). This means that meritocracy-based rewards motivate individuals to achieve higher levels and contribute maximally. However, these reward systems also face several challenges. According to Napoletano (2024), that a meritocratic system that is too narrow—especially one

that focuses only on academic achievement—can strengthen unhealthy competition, ignore inclusivity and social justice, and emphasize academic achievement, creating a competitive and exclusive environment where only a few students benefit (Clarke et al., 2024; Ho, 2021; Zhang, 2021). Such a reward system tends to ignore other aspects of students.

Leadership and the ability to manage the governance of work contracts for educators and education personnel as an accountability instrument reveal work contracts, both performance-based. This is due to periodic evaluations that are directly related to contract extensions or terminations. Meanwhile, according to Ismawati et al. (2023) and Kamau et al. (2021), a fair and transparent evaluation and promotion system will help maintain teacher commitment to continue developing and contributing to improving the quality of education in schools. With opportunities to develop, both in terms of professional skills and careers, teachers will feel appreciated and more motivated to provide the best performance. Clear, measurable performance evaluations enable schools and provide incentives for those who perform well (Afif, 2022). Psychologically, it can increase teacher capacity and competence. This has a direct impact on the quality of education provided to students (Hu et al., 2024). Conversely, the model of implementing temporary work contracts, according to Stacey et al. (2022), although temporary contracts can increase teacher motivation to work harder, they are often accompanied by stress and job dissatisfaction if not balanced with adequate support and clear career guarantees.

Leadership that supports integrating technology into learning is also very important for fostering a culture of innovation in schools. According to Manaf (2024), visionary leadership that supports the use of technology will encourage the development of a culture of continuous learning, where teachers and students can innovate and explore learning methods more relevant to the demands of the times. Although the benefits of technology in education are enormous, integrating technology also faces several challenges, such as the digital divide, the need for teacher training, and the need for policies that support equitable access and infrastructure. This digital divide can lead to inequality in opportunities to access technology, which in turn can affect the quality of education students receive. Therefore, schools and governments need to ensure that all students and teachers have equal access to technology facilities (Abduvalieva et al., 2024; Mexhuani, 2025).

The strength of this leadership lies in the ability to synergize technology-based learning systems with students (Haleem et al., 2022; Kalyani, 2024). Learning technology can function as a learning aid and a catalyst for innovation (Djibran et al., 2024; Kalyani, 2024). The application of technology impacts students and improves teacher competencies, such as digital literacy, collaboration, digital content creation, and problem-solving (Flores-Chacón et al., 2023; Kalyani, 2024). Leadership policies that support the integration of technology into learning are also crucial for creating a culture of innovation in schools. According to Manaf (2024), visionary leadership involves supporting the use of technology and fostering a continuous learning culture in which teachers and students can innovate and explore various learning methods (Abduvalieva et al., 2024;

Mexhuani, 2025). Policies that support teacher career development and infrastructure are prioritized for successful technology integration in education (Abduvalieva et al., 2024; Manaf, 2024). The integration of religious values with digital technology has proven effective, aligning with a school culture rooted in integrity, discipline, role models, and empathy.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that applying religious values in visionary leadership at Al-Ya'lu Malang Excellence Elementary School significantly enhances school culture. Core values such as integrity, discipline, exemplary behavior, and empathy foster a learning ecosystem that supports academic achievement and a competitive spirit, as evidenced by active participation in competitions at local to national levels. Students' engagement strengthens institutional identity, idealism, and resilience, while leaders' ability to translate these values into practical actions drives synergy among teachers and students. Integrating technological modernization further supports innovative learning and competency development.

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations, including its qualitative approach, small sample size, and focus on a single case in the Indonesian context, which may limit generalizability. Future research should explore similar leadership models across diverse educational settings using mixed-methods or comparative studies. Nonetheless, the findings suggest that combining visionary leadership grounded in religious values with digital innovation provides a strategic framework for adaptive, sustainable, and future-ready education systems.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors express gratitude to the leadership of Maulana Malik Ibrahim State Islamic University, Malang, for their support and facilities. Special thanks to the principal, vice principal, and students of SD Unggulan Al-Ya'lu Malang for their time, information, and cooperation, which made this research possible

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