

Beyond the Classroom: Strategic Principal Leadership in Planning Character-Based Co-Curricular Programs

Ananda Vian Saleh Presiden^{1*}, Senowarsito², Ngurah Ayu Nyoman Murniati³

Education Management Department, Universitas Persatuan Guru Republik Indonesia

Semarang, Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia

Email: ananda.vian135@guru.sd.belajar.id¹, senowarsito@upgris.ac.id²,

ngurahayunyoman@upgris.ac.id³

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Abstract:

This study aims to analyze principal leadership in planning co-curricular programs to strengthen character education. This research used a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis involving principals, vice principals, teachers, program coordinators, and relevant stakeholders. Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, with data validity strengthened through triangulation and member checking. The results revealed five key practices of principal leadership in co-curricular program planning: comprehensive needs analysis, alignment of character education goals with the school's vision and mission, stakeholder engagement through collaborative planning, integration of academic learning with character development, and strategies for overcoming challenges through resource optimization and coordination. This study concluded that effective principal leadership in the planning stage is a strategic factor in the sustainability of character education through co-curricular programs. The research findings provide practical implications for strengthening the role of principals in designing contextual, collaborative, and sustainable co-curricular programs.

Keywords: *Leadership, Co-curricular Programs, Character Education, School Planning*

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis kepemimpinan kepala sekolah dalam perencanaan program kokurikuler untuk memperkuat pendidikan karakter. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi partisipatif, dan analisis dokumen yang melibatkan kepala sekolah, wakil kepala sekolah, guru, koordinator program, serta pemangku kepentingan terkait. Analisis data dilakukan menggunakan model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña, dengan validitas data diperkuat melalui triangulasi dan *member checking*. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan lima praktik utama kepemimpinan kepala sekolah dalam perencanaan program kokurikuler, yaitu analisis kebutuhan secara komprehensif, penyelarasan tujuan pendidikan karakter dengan visi dan misi sekolah, pelibatan pemangku kepentingan melalui perencanaan kolaboratif, integrasi pembelajaran akademik dengan pengembangan karakter, serta strategi mengatasi tantangan melalui optimalisasi sumber daya dan koordinasi. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa kepemimpinan kepala sekolah yang efektif dalam tahap perencanaan menjadi faktor strategis dalam keberlanjutan pendidikan karakter melalui program kokurikuler. Temuan penelitian memberikan implikasi praktis bagi penguatan peran kepala sekolah dalam merancang program kokurikuler yang kontekstual, kolaboratif, dan berkelanjutan.

Kata Kunci: *Kepemimpinan, Program Kokurikuler, Pendidikan Karakter, Perencanaan Sekolah*

INTRODUCTION

Character education has become one of the most urgent priorities in contemporary education because schools are increasingly expected to prepare students who possess not only academic competence but also integrity, responsibility, empathy, discipline, and social awareness (Safuan et al., 2024; Kholifah et al., 2024; Sholeh et al., 2025). Rapid technological advancement, digital communication, and changing social interactions have created educational environments in which students are frequently exposed to misinformation, cyberbullying, individualism, and declining civic values (Chen, 2022; Manaf et al., 2026). Consequently, educational institutions are required to cultivate moral and social competencies alongside cognitive achievement to enable students to respond responsibly to complex societal challenges (Tolla, 2024; Zahra et al., 2024). International organizations and national education systems consistently emphasize that sustainable educational development depends on the balanced integration of intellectual, emotional, ethical, and social learning (Gosić, 2025). Therefore, character education is no longer regarded as an additional component of schooling but as a strategic educational mission that contributes to individual well-being, social cohesion, and the preparation of responsible citizens capable of participating constructively in democratic and multicultural societies (Amin, Mahanal, & Rohman, 2022).

Despite the growing recognition of character education, many schools continue to experience difficulties in translating character values into consistent educational practices (Zahra et al., 2024; Belle & Chemen, 2025; Tohet et al., 2025). Character education is frequently confined to classroom instruction or ceremonial activities without providing students with authentic opportunities to internalize values through meaningful experiences (Berkowitz, 2022; Tolla, 2024). As a result, educational programs often emphasize cognitive achievement while neglecting the systematic development of discipline, cooperation, leadership, responsibility, and social sensitivity. This imbalance reduces the effectiveness of character education because values are more likely to be developed through repeated practice than through theoretical instruction alone (Gosić, 2025; Anti & Arifin, 2025; Imamah et al., 2024)). Numerous educational reports indicate that students' behavioral development requires learning environments where values are continuously experienced in daily school life. Consequently, schools need comprehensive educational strategies that integrate character formation into various learning contexts, including curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities, to ensure sustainable character development (Amin et al., 2022).

Among these educational strategies, co-curricular programs provide considerable potential for strengthening character education because they bridge formal instruction and authentic learning experiences (Martawijaya et al., 2025; Sholeh et al., 2025). Activities such as literacy programs, religious habituation, environmental campaigns, project-based learning, community service, cultural

performances, and collaborative student projects allow learners to practice values directly within real educational contexts (Fajarwati et al., 2022; Maisyaroh et al., 2023). These experiences encourage students to develop self-discipline, communication skills, teamwork, leadership, responsibility, creativity, and empathy while simultaneously reinforcing academic learning. However, the effectiveness of co-curricular activities depends largely on systematic educational planning rather than merely increasing the number of school programs (Huda et al., 2024). Without careful planning, co-curricular activities risk becoming fragmented, ceremonial, or disconnected from intended educational objectives (Manaf et al., 2026; Zahra et al., 2024). Therefore, schools require strategic planning mechanisms capable of aligning co-curricular activities with institutional goals and character education priorities to maximize educational impact.

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that principal leadership plays a decisive role in improving educational quality, organizational effectiveness, teacher performance, and school development. Research by Herman et al. (2022) and Falah et al. (2023) reported that effective principals establish clear organizational direction, strengthen collaboration among school members, and improve educational performance through strategic leadership practices (Amirudin et al., 2026). More recent studies also emphasize that transformational and strategic leadership contribute to organizational commitment, innovation, sustainable school improvement, and institutional effectiveness (Alshuhumi et al., 2026; Haryaka et al., 2026; Ismail, 2025). Within the context of character education, leadership has additionally been associated with building positive school culture, integrating moral values into educational activities, and strengthening students' personal development (Kareem et al., 2023). Collectively, these studies confirm that principal leadership substantially influences educational success across multiple organizational dimensions.

Although previous research has enriched understanding of educational leadership and character education, significant limitations remain. Existing studies predominantly investigate leadership implementation, teacher empowerment, organizational culture, educational effectiveness, and the outcomes of character education programs after they have been executed (Alzoraiki et al., 2024; Sun et al., 2024). Comparatively little attention has been devoted to examining leadership during the planning phase, particularly how principals formulate program objectives, involve stakeholders, allocate resources, coordinate collaborative decision-making, and align co-curricular activities with character education goals before implementation begins (Liu et al., 2025; Martawijaya et al., 2025; Ngo et al., 2022). This omission is important because planning represents the foundation upon which organizing, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation are subsequently constructed (Sayadi, 2016). Insufficient planning may result in inconsistent program implementation, inefficient resource utilization, and weak alignment between educational activities and intended character outcomes (Sholeh et al., 2025). Consequently, understanding principal leadership during program planning remains an important theoretical and practical issue requiring further investigation.

This study addresses that gap by positioning planning as the central analytical focus of principal leadership within co-curricular character education. Rather than examining whether character education programs are effective after implementation, this research investigates how leadership shapes program design before activities are conducted. Specifically, the study explores how principals formulate educational goals, encourage stakeholder participation, facilitate collaborative planning, integrate institutional values into activity design, prioritize educational resources, and ensure strategic coherence among various co-curricular initiatives. This perspective extends existing educational leadership literature by demonstrating that successful character education depends not only on effective implementation but also on comprehensive planning processes that systematically connect institutional vision, educational management, and character development objectives. Accordingly, the study contributes a planning-oriented leadership perspective that remains underrepresented within current educational leadership and character education scholarship.

Based on these considerations, this study investigates principal leadership in planning co-curricular programs for strengthening character education at SD Negeri Ngaliyan 04 Semarang. The study is guided by the research question of how principals exercise leadership in designing co-curricular programs that systematically support character education objectives. It argues that effective principal leadership during the planning stage establishes strategic direction, promotes collaborative participation among school stakeholders, aligns educational resources with institutional priorities, and integrates character values into coherent educational programs. This argument assumes that planning is not merely an administrative activity but a strategic leadership process that determines the quality, sustainability, and educational relevance of co-curricular programs. By examining leadership practices at the planning stage, this research is expected to enrich educational leadership theory while providing practical guidance for school leaders seeking to design sustainable and effective character education programs in elementary schools.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate principal leadership in planning co-curricular programs to strengthen character education. A qualitative case study was considered appropriate because the research sought to obtain an in-depth understanding of leadership practices, planning processes, stakeholder interactions, and decision-making within their real-life context. Rather than measuring causal relationships or testing hypotheses, this approach enabled the researcher to explore how the principal conceptualized, organized, and coordinated the planning of co-curricular programs intended to foster students' character development. The case study design also allowed the researcher to examine the phenomenon holistically by considering organizational culture, institutional policies, and collaborative planning processes as interconnected elements influencing leadership practices.

The research was conducted at SD Negeri Ngaliyan 04 Semarang, Indonesia, during the 2025/2026 academic year. The school was purposively selected because it has consistently implemented various co-curricular programs that explicitly integrate character education into school activities, including literacy programs, religious habituation, environmental initiatives, and student leadership development. Moreover, the principal actively involves teachers and school stakeholders in collaborative educational planning, making the school an appropriate setting for examining leadership practices in planning character-oriented co-curricular programs. The researcher served as the primary research instrument responsible for collecting, interpreting, and analyzing qualitative data throughout the study.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposively selected participants consisting of the school principal as the key informant, vice principals, teachers, coordinators of co-curricular programs, and other school stakeholders directly involved in planning character education activities. Interviews were conducted throughout the research period at the school to explore how leadership was exercised, particular planning strategies were adopted, planning procedures were implemented, participation in decision-making occurred, planning activities were carried out, and collaborative planning occurred. Participant observation was undertaken during planning meetings, school coordination activities, and selected co-curricular events to understand naturally occurring interactions and leadership practices. Documentation analysis included annual school work plans, strategic plans, school policies, meeting minutes, co-curricular program guidelines, activity schedules, evaluation reports, and other institutional documents supporting the planning process.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Eryani & Ahyani, 2026). Data condensation involved selecting, focusing, simplifying, coding, categorizing, and organizing information from interviews, observations, and documentation to align with the research objectives. The condensed data were subsequently presented through narrative descriptions, thematic matrices, and conceptual categorizations to facilitate the identification of patterns, relationships, and emerging themes concerning principal leadership in planning co-curricular programs. Finally, conclusions were continuously drawn and verified throughout the research process by comparing evidence across different data sources and revisiting the collected information to ensure that the interpretations remained consistent, credible, and firmly grounded in empirical findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Principal Leadership in Conducting Needs Analysis

Principal leadership in conducting needs analysis refers to the principal's strategic efforts to identify and prioritize the school's educational needs before

formulating co-curricular programs to strengthen character education. Operationally, this process involves examining students' characteristics, evaluating previous programs, assessing current school conditions, gathering teachers' perspectives, and aligning planning priorities with the school's vision, mission, and character education objectives. The findings indicate that needs analysis was not treated as an administrative requirement but as a collaborative leadership practice that guided subsequent planning decisions. The principal emphasized that every annual program began by identifying character values that required reinforcement through discussions with teachers and reviews of previous evaluations, before determining appropriate activities. This process ensured that co-curricular programs addressed authentic student needs while maintaining consistency with institutional priorities and the school's long-term educational vision.

Interview findings further demonstrate that needs analysis was conducted through participatory leadership involving teachers as key contributors to the planning process. The principal explained that teachers were invited to share information regarding students' learning habits, discipline, participation, and social behavior before annual programs were formulated. Similarly, the character education coordinator confirmed that planning meetings encouraged teachers to present classroom challenges and recommendations so that co-curricular activities reflected students' actual developmental needs rather than continuing routine programs from previous years. These findings suggest that planning decisions were based on collective professional judgment instead of individual administrative authority. Such collaborative practices enabled the principal to obtain comprehensive information from multiple perspectives, thereby increasing the relevance, accuracy, and responsiveness of co-curricular program planning to both institutional goals and students' character development needs.

The observation findings reinforced the interview evidence by showing that planning meetings consistently began with discussions of students' behavioral development, previous program evaluations, and school priorities before specific co-curricular activities were determined. The researcher observed that the principal encouraged participants to justify proposed programs using classroom evidence and documented evaluations rather than personal assumptions. School planning documents also demonstrated explicit alignment between identified educational needs and planned activities intended to strengthen discipline, responsibility, cooperation, environmental awareness, and religious values. Collectively, these findings reveal a consistent pattern of evidence-based and collaborative leadership in which needs analysis functioned as the foundation of strategic educational planning. By integrating empirical school data, stakeholder participation, and institutional vision, the principal ensured that every co-curricular program was systematically designed to support sustainable character education.

Table 1. Findings on Principal Leadership in Conducting Needs Analysis

Informant Position	Interview Excerpt	Indicator
Principal	"We first identify students' character needs, evaluate previous programs, discuss classroom conditions with teachers, and align every planned activity with the school's vision before determining annual co-curricular programs."	Analysis of students' needs; evaluation of previous programs; alignment with school vision; evidence-based planning
Character Education Coordinator	"The principal asks every teacher to explain students' behavior and classroom challenges before deciding school programs so that the activities truly respond to students' needs."	Teacher participation; collaborative needs analysis; identification of classroom issues
Vice Principal for Curriculum	"Planning meetings always begin with reviewing school conditions and determining which character values require further reinforcement before programs are designed."	Review of school conditions; prioritization of character values
Teacher	"Teachers are encouraged to provide suggestions because they directly observe students' daily development."	Participatory decision-making; utilization of teacher experience

Table 1 demonstrates that a systematic and collaborative planning approach characterized principal leadership in conducting needs analysis. Across all informants, needs analysis was consistently described as the initial activity preceding program formulation. The principal emphasized evidence gathering through evaluation and institutional alignment, whereas teachers highlighted their active involvement in providing classroom-based information. These perspectives collectively indicate that planning decisions were grounded in empirical educational conditions rather than administrative assumptions. The convergence of responses from different informants strengthens the credibility of the finding that needs analysis constituted a strategic leadership function within the planning process.

Principal Leadership in Determining Character Education Objectives

Principal leadership in determining character education objectives refers to the principal's strategic ability to formulate the character values that become the foundation for planning co-curricular programs. Operationally, this process involves identifying priority character values based on students' behavioral conditions, the existing school culture, institutional vision and mission, and expected educational outcomes. In this study, determining objectives was not limited to establishing general educational goals; it also included selecting specific character values, defining expected student behaviors, and translating these values into measurable co-curricular activities. Consequently, the formulation of character education objectives became a strategic leadership process that provided direction for program design, implementation, and evaluation while ensuring consistency between institutional goals and students' character development.

The principal explained that the determination of character education objectives was preceded by identifying the most urgent character issues experienced by students and aligning these priorities with the school's long-term

educational vision. Principal: "Every year we determine which character values need greater emphasis based on students' current conditions. For example, if discipline and responsibility still need improvement, these become our priority objectives. We then ensure that every co-curricular activity is designed to strengthen those values while remaining consistent with the school's vision and educational goals." The interview indicates that the principal exercised strategic leadership by positioning character education objectives as the foundation of program planning rather than as general educational statements. The determination of objectives emerged from the analysis of students' developmental needs and institutional priorities, enabling co-curricular activities to focus on clearly defined character outcomes.



Figure 1. Process of Determining Character Education Objectives through Principal Leadership

Figure 1 illustrates the sequential process implemented by the principal in determining character education goals during **co-curricular program planning**. The process begins with analyzing students' needs, reviewing existing learning activities, and evaluating previous co-curricular program implementations. The principal then facilitates collaborative discussions with teachers and relevant stakeholders to identify priority character values that need to be strengthened. These values are subsequently aligned with the school's vision and mission, translated into specific character education objectives, and integrated into the design of co-curricular programs that support academic learning and character development. This process demonstrates that the principal's leadership is characterized by evidence-based decision-making, collaborative planning, and strategic alignment, ensuring that co-curricular activities systematically contribute to strengthening students' character formation.

Strategic Design of Co-Curricular Programs

Strategic design of co-curricular programs refers to the principal's leadership in systematically designing co-curricular activities that simultaneously support academic learning and strengthen students' character development. Operationally, this process involves selecting appropriate program types, determining expected character outcomes, aligning activities with the school's vision and mission, integrating curricular and co-curricular learning, assigning responsibilities, and ensuring that each activity contributes to students' holistic development. In this study, strategic design was not understood merely as preparing an annual activity schedule but as a deliberate educational planning process through which every co-curricular activity was intentionally linked to

specific character values such as discipline, responsibility, leadership, cooperation, self-confidence, environmental awareness, and religious commitment. Consequently, program design functioned as a strategic instrument for translating educational goals into authentic learning experiences.

Table 2. Findings on the Strategic Design of Co-Curricular Programs

Informant Position	Interview Excerpt	Indicator
Principal	"Every co-curricular activity must have a clear educational purpose. We do not organize programs simply to fill the school calendar; every activity is designed to strengthen particular character values while supporting classroom learning."	Strategic program design; alignment between academic learning and character education
Vice Principal for Curriculum	"When preparing the annual program, we first determine the expected character outcomes before selecting appropriate activities such as literacy, environmental projects, religious habituation, or student performances."	Outcome-oriented planning; selection of activities based on character education objectives
Character Education Coordinator	"Each activity includes indicators of responsibility, cooperation, discipline, or leadership so teachers understand the expected learning outcomes."	Integration of character values into program design; formulation of measurable learning indicators
Teacher	"The programs are interconnected. Literacy strengthens responsibility, environmental activities build cooperation, while student performances increase confidence and leadership."	Integration of multiple character values across co-curricular activities; holistic character development

Table 2 demonstrates that a deliberate integration of educational objectives, character values, and learning experiences characterized the strategic design of co-curricular programs. Across all informants, the principal consistently emphasized that every activity must possess explicit educational purposes rather than functioning as an isolated or ceremonial event. The interview data indicate that planning began with determining expected character outcomes before selecting appropriate activities capable of facilitating those outcomes. This sequence reflects a backward design approach in which educational objectives became the primary reference for program development. Consequently, literacy activities, environmental projects, religious habituation, health campaigns, and student performances were not treated as independent initiatives but as interconnected educational strategies aimed at cultivating specific dimensions of students' character development.

Another important finding reveals the integration of strategic and instructional leadership in designing co-curricular programs. The principal not only determined the strategic direction of character education but also ensured that teachers clearly understood the relationship between planned activities and expected character outcomes. This shared understanding enabled teachers to design learning experiences that complemented classroom instruction and fostered discipline, responsibility, cooperation, leadership, self-confidence, and

social awareness. Participant observations reinforced these findings, showing that planning meetings consistently began with identifying educational objectives before selecting annual co-curricular activities. School planning documents explicitly linked literacy programs, religious habituation, environmental care, student performances, and health-related activities to specific character values and student competencies. These findings demonstrate that co-curricular programs were intentionally designed through a systematic educational framework rather than functioning as isolated or ceremonial school activities.

Overall, the findings indicate that principal leadership in the strategic design of co-curricular programs was characterized by goal-oriented, integrated, and value-based planning. The principal first established expected character outcomes, collaborated with teachers to determine appropriate activities, and ensured that every program aligned with the school's vision and educational objectives. A consistent pattern emerged: planning began by defining priority character values, followed by selecting relevant activities, integrating them with academic learning, assigning measurable educational indicators, and implementing programs through collaborative teacher participation. This recurring sequence illustrates that strategic program design served as the mechanism through which institutional vision, instructional practice, and character education were translated into coherent, meaningful, and sustainable learning experiences that promoted students' holistic development.

Challenges in Planning Co-Curricular Programs

Challenges in planning co-curricular programs refer to the internal and external constraints encountered by the principal when preparing co-curricular activities to strengthen character education. Operationally, these challenges include limited financial resources, insufficient parental participation, restricted support from external stakeholders, scheduling constraints, and the need to optimize available school resources. In this study, challenges were not perceived as barriers that hindered educational planning but as strategic issues requiring adaptive leadership, collaborative problem-solving, and effective resource management. Consequently, the principal's leadership was reflected not only in designing educational programs but also in identifying constraints, coordinating stakeholders, and developing practical solutions to ensure that co-curricular activities remained aligned with character education objectives despite existing limitations.

Table 3. Findings on Challenges in Planning Co-Curricular Programs

Informant Position	Interview Excerpt	Indicator
Principal	"Our biggest challenge is balancing the planned programs with the available budget. We therefore prioritize essential activities and collaborate with teachers and community partners to maximize available resources."	Budget constraints; resource optimization; strategic decision-making
Vice Principal for Curriculum	"Some programs require stronger support from parents and external institutions. Without their participation, several planned activities cannot be implemented optimally."	Limited parental involvement; need for external collaboration

Character Education Coordinator	"Sometimes we have to adjust the implementation schedule because of overlapping academic activities, but we continue coordinating so that character education programs remain effective."	Scheduling flexibility; collaborative coordination
Teacher	"Although facilities and resources are limited, the principal always encourages teachers to be creative and work together so that students continue to receive meaningful learning experiences."	Teacher collaboration; adaptive leadership; innovation in resource utilization

Table 3 demonstrates that the challenges encountered in planning co-curricular programs originated from both organizational and stakeholder-related factors. Budget limitations emerged as the most frequently mentioned constraint, influencing the school's ability to implement all planned activities according to the initial design. Nevertheless, the interview findings indicate that the principal did not respond by reducing the educational quality of the programs. Instead, strategic priorities were established by identifying essential activities, optimizing existing resources, and strengthening collaboration among teachers and community partners. This finding illustrates that effective leadership under resource constraints depends on the ability to make evidence-based decisions while maintaining the educational objectives of character development.

Another important pattern emerging from the findings concerns the critical role of collaboration in overcoming challenges encountered during the planning of co-curricular programs. Informants consistently emphasized that limited financial resources, insufficient parental participation, scheduling conflicts, and the need for stronger external partnerships significantly influenced the feasibility of program implementation. Rather than treating these constraints as isolated problems, the principal adopted an adaptive and participatory leadership approach by promoting collective problem-solving, flexible scheduling, shared responsibility, and continuous communication among teachers, parents, and community stakeholders. Observation findings reinforced this evidence, showing that planning meetings focused on collaborative budget allocation, adjustment of activity schedules, redistribution of teacher responsibilities, and identification of external support opportunities. School planning documents further demonstrated resource optimization through collaborative budgeting and integrated program planning, indicating that organizational challenges were addressed strategically rather than reactively.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that principal leadership in planning co-curricular programs extends beyond administrative management to strategic decision-making integrating educational needs, institutional goals, and character education priorities (Mekuria et al., 2024). Principals conducted systematic needs analyses before determining program priorities, ensuring that planning reflected students' developmental conditions and school expectations (MacNeil et al., 2024; Yusof et al., 2022). This supports Salim and Hasanah (2021) and Triyastuti et al. (2025), who emphasize strategic leadership in educational planning (Jumilati, 2026). However, this study extends previous research by showing that needs

analysis serves not only as a managerial activity but also as the foundation for sustainable character education programs (Maisyaroh et al., 2023). Theoretically, these findings strengthen strategic educational leadership by positioning needs analysis as a central planning function (Roberts & Webster, 2022).

The study further reveals that principal leadership is evident in the establishment of explicit character education objectives before designing co-curricular programs. Values, including discipline, responsibility, integrity, cooperation, and self-confidence, were selected based on students' behavioral conditions and institutional aspirations (Dabdoub et al., 2024; Manurung et al., 2026; Mukarromah et al., 2025). These findings support Juharyanto et al. (2024) and Haedari et al. (2024), who highlight the importance of integrating character values into educational practice (Baharuddin et al., 2025; Juharyanto & Arifin, 2025). However, this research demonstrates that value formulation begins during planning rather than implementation. Consequently, principal leadership is interpreted as a value-oriented planning process that translates educational priorities into structured programs, strengthening the relationship between strategic planning and value-based school management.

Another important finding concerns stakeholder participation in planning co-curricular programs. Teachers, vice principals, program coordinators, and school committees actively contributed to identifying priorities, discussing program alternatives, and determining educational objectives. These findings are consistent with Triyastuti et al. (2025), who argue that collaborative leadership enhances organizational effectiveness through shared decision-making (Jumilati, 2026). However, this study further demonstrates that stakeholder participation ensures co-curricular programs address students' developmental needs rather than merely fulfilling administrative requirements. The findings reinforce collaborative leadership theory by showing that inclusive planning strengthens program legitimacy, sustainability, and institutional commitment while encouraging schools to formalize collaborative planning practices (Anderson et al., 2023; Otaki et al., 2022).

The findings also indicate that co-curricular programs were strategically designed to integrate academic learning with character education through literacy, religious habituation, environmental activities, student performances, and health programs. This supports Elice et al. (2025), who emphasize the contribution of strategic leadership to holistic student development (Elice et al., 2025). However, this study provides additional evidence that successful character education depends primarily on systematic planning before implementation – theoretically, educational planning functions as a bridge connecting institutional vision with meaningful learning experiences. Practically, school leaders are encouraged to design co-curricular programs around explicit character outcomes rather than isolated or ceremonial educational activities (Tawiah et al., 2024).

The study also identifies several challenges affecting co-curricular planning, including budget limitations, insufficient parental involvement, limited external partnerships, and scheduling constraints (Nzioka et al., 2025). These findings agree with Hendriawan et al. (2025), who argue that leadership effectiveness depends on organizational support and stakeholder collaboration

(Alfi et al., 2025). However, this study shows that adaptive leadership enables principals to transform constraints into opportunities through resource optimization and participatory problem-solving. These findings contribute to adaptive educational leadership literature by illustrating planning resilience under institutional limitations. Practically, sustainable character education requires stronger collaboration among schools, families, communities, and external organizations to support long-term program development.

Overall, this study contributes to educational leadership literature by emphasizing leadership during the planning stage of co-curricular programs. While previous studies mainly focus on implementation and leadership outcomes, this research identifies planning as the foundation for program coherence, sustainability, and quality. The findings suggest that strategic planning, collaborative participation, value-oriented objectives, systematic program design, and adaptive problem-solving form an integrated leadership model for strengthening character education. Practically, the study offers guidance for evidence-based planning and collaborative management while providing a conceptual basis for future research on planning quality, implementation effectiveness, and character education outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the most significant finding is that principal leadership in planning co-curricular programs constitutes the foundation for sustainable character education rather than merely an administrative function. Effective leadership was demonstrated through a systematic sequence of needs analysis, formulation of character education objectives, collaborative stakeholder engagement, strategic program design, and adaptive management of organizational constraints, ensuring that co-curricular activities consistently support students' holistic character development. These findings provide an important lesson that the success of character education depends largely on the quality of leadership during the planning stage before program implementation occurs. Scientifically, this study contributes to educational leadership and management literature by extending the discourse from leadership implementation toward planning-oriented leadership as a critical dimension of strategic educational management. Nevertheless, the study is limited to a single elementary school and the planning phase only. Future research should involve multiple educational settings, compare leadership practices across school types, and examine how planning quality influences implementation effectiveness and measurable character education outcomes.

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