



School Principal Management in Integrating Character Education: A Case Study of Realfunrainbow Kindergarten in Salatiga City

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the principal's management in integrating character education at Realfunrainbow Kindergarten in Salatiga City. Character education in early childhood has become increasingly important in response to globalization, the rapid development of digital technology, and socio-cultural changes that influence children's behavior. The study employed a descriptive qualitative approach, with data collected through observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Methodological triangulation was applied to ensure the credibility of the findings. The research participants included the principal, two Group B teachers, three parents as program beneficiaries, and three local MSME owners as internship partners. Data were analyzed through the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal a distinctive innovation at Realfunrainbow Kindergarten, namely the integration of character education with local socio-economic contexts through internship programs at MSMEs. This initiative enables children to practice values such as discipline, cooperation, respect, and responsibility in authentic settings, thereby strengthening experiential learning and community engagement. In addition, the integration of character education is systematically implemented through the principal's management functions, including planning, organizing, mobilizing, and controlling. Planning is based on needs analysis with a focus on character development, while organizing involves assigning teachers as mentors, engaging parents as collaborators, and establishing partnerships with local MSMEs. Mobilization is carried out through role modeling and motivation, whereas controlling is conducted through continuous supervision and evaluation. In conclusion, the successful integration of character education is largely determined by the principal's managerial and leadership capacities in managing school resources comprehensively and sustainably, as well as in fostering community partnerships to support early childhood character development.

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Introduction

National education essentially aims not only to intellectually enlighten the nation, but also to support the development of students' potential, enabling them to become individuals characterized by faith, piety, noble morals, good health, knowledge, competence, creativity, independence and have the ability to effectively participate in society (Mahfudoh and Rohmawati, 2020). The accelerated advancement of technology and the dynamics of globalization have influenced multiple aspects of life among people of all age groups, including early childhood education. Freedom and easy access to the internet can satisfy curiosity about everything. However, this also has negative impacts on socio-cultural aspects



such as the loss of character values or behavioral etiquette, changes in lifestyles that imitate foreign cultures, which can lead to the erosion of a nation's culture (Rahmawati et al., 2022).

The challenges of globalization, advances in digital technology, and rapid sociocultural change have significantly impacted children's behavior patterns, including early childhood. Children are increasingly encountering various external influences that are not always consistent with expected moral and social values. Easy access to various information media and technology can lead to children becoming less active and less active, which negatively impacts their physical health and development. Furthermore, it can also disrupt children's social interactions (Munisa, 2023).

Kindergarten (TK), as the initial level of formal education, plays a highly strategic role in building the foundation of children's character. At this age, children are in a developmental phase that is highly sensitive to environmental stimuli, both from family and school. A comprehensive approach to character education is grounded in spiritual, social, and health values and is reinforced through collaboration among families, schools, and communities (Sinulingga, 2025). Values such as discipline, responsibility, honesty, empathy, cooperation, and independence need to be instilled from an early age to become ingrained habits in children.

Therefore, character education in kindergarten must be designed systematically and integrated into all learning activities and school culture in line with the thinking of Rahmawati & Rachman (2025) who emphasize the need for a systematic approach in implementing effective character education reinforcement for early childhood. Character instillation at an early age so that positive character can be formed from an early age. Through the habituation of character education from an early age can prevent the formation of bad personalities and help children's success in the future, and the habit of positive behavior from an early age is very important to be able to form good character.

Character education needs to be a system that instills noble values in students as the nation's future generation. This system encompasses knowledge, awareness, determination, and actions that reflect values toward God, the self, fellow human beings, the surrounding environment, and the nation, thus developing perfect human beings (Asyha et al., 2024).

The application of character education in kindergarten cannot run optimally without effective school management. The principal, as the leader and educational manager, plays a key role in integrating character education into the school system. The principal's leadership has a significant influence on enhancing the quality of education, particularly in developing student character. The quality of leadership determines the principal's ability to integrate all elements of education to support children's character development. Strong and visionary leaders act as facilitators in shaping individuals and communities with integrity (Leon, 2023).

The principal is not only responsible for managing administration, but also for formulating a vision for character education, motivating teachers, creating a conducive school culture, and forging partnerships with parents and the community. The principal needs to involve various parties according to their expertise, the needs of the institution, and the conditions of the institution, by collaborating with various parties (Abdiah, 2023).

Research by Arrasyid and Karwanto (2025) confirms that the principal's leadership role is crucial to the success of character education in schools. A principal with strong managerial and leadership skills is able to consistently integrate character values into school policies, learning practices, and social interactions within the school community. This is further confirmed by Rahayu, Halima, and Arfin (2021), who state that an effective leader in an educational institution has good relationships, communication skills, and the ability to



motivate students to express their opinions. Similarly, Sudrajat et al. (2021) state that quality early childhood education is supported by superior human resources, adequate facilities and infrastructure, an effective management system, and the leadership of a principal capable of applying theory to real-world practice.

However, studies specifically discussing principal management in the context of character education at the kindergarten level are still relatively limited, so an in-depth study is needed to enrich the scientific treasury in this field. Realfunrainbow Kindergarten in Sidorejo, Salatiga, Central Java, was selected as the research site because of its distinctive commitment to character education and its innovative management practices. Established in 2015 under the auspices of a private foundation, the school has steadily built a reputation for embedding values such as self-confidence, independence, cooperation, responsibility into daily learning activities. Its approach reflects alignment with the Graduate profile dimensions, making it a relevant case for examining how early childhood institutions cultivate moral and social development. Moreover, Realfunrainbow Kindergarten demonstrates a hybrid management model that combines foundation-based governance with participatory involvement from teachers and parents, ensuring both accountability and flexibility in educational delivery.

This research is expected to contribute academically by enriching discourse on character education in early childhood settings, practically by offering recommendations for documentation and quality assurance, and at the policy level by highlighting the effectiveness of hybrid management in sustaining educational innovation. In this way, the study not only advances theoretical understanding but also provides actionable insights for educators, institutions, and policymakers seeking to strengthen holistic early childhood education.

Research Method

This research adopts a descriptive qualitative field research approach, in which descriptive qualitative research refers to describing a variable related to the problem being studied without questioning the relationship between the variables being studied (Sugiyono, 2017). This descriptive qualitative research approach is based on phenomena that occur in the research field, which are related to the principal's management in strengthening character education at Realfunrainbow Kindergarten in Salatiga City.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews. In qualitative research, data are gathered in natural settings using primary data sources, with data collection methods emphasizing participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. (Sugiyono, 2017). Observations were conducted by visiting the school several times to observe and experience its activities directly. Interviews are purposeful conversations conducted by two parties (interviewer and interviewee) with the aim of obtaining data and facts in the field. The informants consisted of the principal, two group B teachers, three parents, and three internship partners, selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance and depth of information. The principal was chosen for her leadership role in policy implementation and oversight of character education, teachers for their responsibility in designing and delivering classroom activities, parents for their perspectives on the school's influence on children's moral development and family collaboration. The internship partners served as primary facilitators, providing real-world work experience, mentoring, and direct guidance from professional staff/supervisors. The criteria for selection included direct involvement in school management, teaching, or parenting; at least one year of experience at the institution; and willingness to provide reflective insights. Meanwhile, documentation is intended to collect



data from various documents that can be in the form of writing, pictures, regulations, minutes, photos, videos, and others. This method was carried out by reviewing documents at Realfunrainbow Kindergarten in Salatiga City.

Data analysis in this study was conducted continuously, starting with the content of the communication messages, selecting them, then categorizing them into similar data, and then analyzing them critically and objectively (Sugiyono, 2017). Data were analyzed in three sequential steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion formulation. Data reduction focuses on organizing, simplifying, and summarizing the core information derived from the data. Data display presented the data in an organized manner for easier understanding, which was then followed by drawing conclusions to provide meaningful interpretations of the findings.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of these findings, triangulation was applied as the main strategy for data validity. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing statements from the principal, teachers, parents, and internship partners, allowing the researcher to identify both consistency and differences in perspectives regarding the implementation of character education and the hybrid management model at Realfunrainbow Kindergarten. Technique triangulation was also employed by cross-checking the results of in-depth interviews with direct observations of school activities. Interviews provided reflective insights into policies, classroom practices, and parental involvement, while observations offered firsthand evidence of how character education was enacted in daily routines. The combination of these approaches enhanced the reliability of the findings by corroborating verbal accounts with actual practices. Through these triangulation methods, the research achieved a higher level of trustworthiness, ensuring that the conclusions drawn about the Realfunrainbow Character Management Model were credible and grounded in multiple, mutually reinforcing sources of evidence.

Results and Discussion

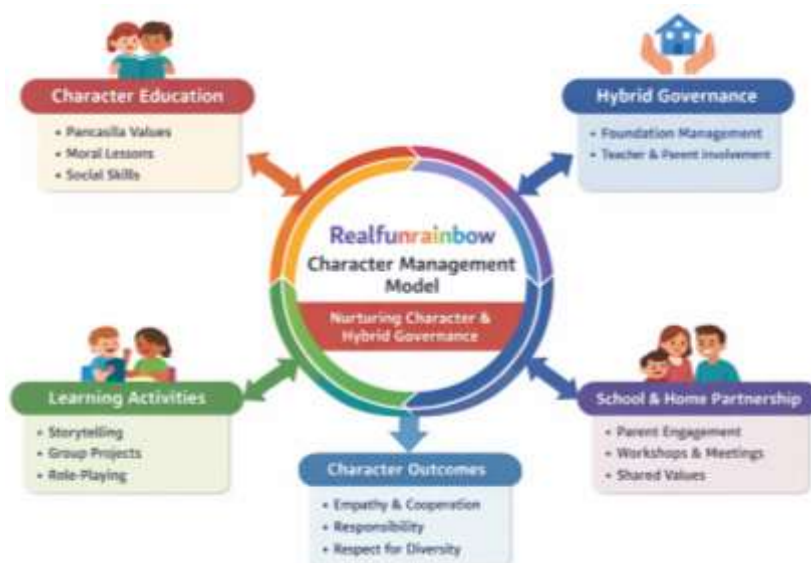


Figure 1. The “Realfunrainbow Character Management Model”

The Realfunrainbow Character Management Model integrates character education with a hybrid governance structure to foster holistic development in early childhood learners. At its core, the model emphasizes the nurturing of values such as self confidence,



cooperation, responsibility, and respect for diversity. These outcomes are achieved through a synergistic interaction between four key components: character education, hybrid governance, learning activities, and school-home partnership. Character education is embedded in daily learning through the application of *Pancasila* values, moral lessons, and social skill development. This is supported by a hybrid governance system that combines foundation-based oversight with active participation from teachers and parents, ensuring both strategic direction and grassroots involvement. Learning activities such as storytelling, group projects, and role-playing serve as experiential tools for instilling character traits in children. Meanwhile, the school-home partnership reinforces these efforts through parent engagement, workshops, and shared values, creating a consistent environment between school and family.

Building on this conceptual framework, the findings of this study indicate that the principal's management in strengthening character education at TK Realfunrainbow Kota Salatiga was implemented systematically through the functions of planning, organizing, actuating, and controlling. At the planning stage, the principal conducted problem analysis and identified students' character development needs based on observations, interviews with teachers and parents, as well as document analysis. The findings revealed a decline in children's character achievement, particularly in the aspects of independence, discipline, and self-confidence. Based on this condition, the principal, together with teachers and parents, formulated the objectives of character education strengthening oriented toward the development of children's life skills, with a focus on discipline, independence, responsibility, and cooperation. These objectives were aligned with the school's vision and mission as well as the eight dimensions of the graduate profile developed by the institution.

In its implementation, the principal established policies through the development of daily habituation programs and an innovative internship program as a reinforcement of outing class activities. The habituation program was integrated into daily school activities through the internalization of the "Seven Habits of Indonesian Excellent Children," which were embedded in learning routines, teacher role modeling, and student discipline regulations. Meanwhile, the internship program was designed as a form of experiential learning that actively involved children in real work environments that were safe and appropriate to their developmental characteristics, supported by collaboration with parents and local micro, small, and medium enterprises (SMEs).

The internship program specifically influenced children's behavior by fostering independence, discipline, and responsibility through direct engagement in real tasks. For instance, children learned to follow instructions, manage simple responsibilities, and cooperate with peers in authentic settings, which strengthened their confidence and social skills. This aligns with David A. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, where knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Children moved through cycles of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. It also reflects the concept of Situated Learning, as children acquired character values within meaningful social contexts that connected school learning with community practices.

Nevertheless, managerial challenges emerged in placing kindergarten children within SME environments. Ensuring safety, adjusting tasks to developmental levels, and coordinating with external partners required careful planning and clear standard operating procedures. The principal addressed these challenges through role distribution among teachers, preparation of SOPs, scheduling, and grouping of children to ensure effective and secure implementation. Thus, the internship program not only enriched children's character



formation but also demonstrated the importance of adaptive management in bridging educational goals with community-based experiential contexts.

Building on these initiatives, the principal's role in actuating and controlling was equally significant. Leadership was demonstrated through exemplary conduct, two-way communication, and continuous guidance and mentoring for teachers. The principal actively conducted briefings, supervision, and evaluations to ensure that the programs were implemented in accordance with the established objectives. Control was carried out through the use of standardized instruments in the form of rubrics and checklists for character assessment, complemented by descriptive evaluations of children's developmental achievements. Therefore, the principal's management in strengthening character education at TK Realfunrainbow Kota Salatiga did not merely focus on program planning but also emphasized consistency in implementation, collaboration with parents and partners, and continuous evaluation as efforts to optimally develop children's character and life skills.

Character education planning is the most strategic stage because it determines the direction, values, and goals of children's character development. In the context of educational management, planning is understood as the process of setting goals and systematic ways to achieve them (Terry, 2016). The results reveal that the principal of Realfunrainbow Kindergarten has successfully integrated character education by starting with the process of formulating the school's that explicitly places character as the main goal of education, namely equipping students with life skills.

This finding is in line with Lickona's (2018) view, which emphasizes that effective character education must be designed consciously (intentionally) and structured (comprehensively). Character education that is not systematically planned risks becoming a symbolic activity and does not have a substantial influence on the development of children's behavior. Thus, character education planning at Realfunrainbow Kindergarten in Salatiga City includes establishing core values, integrating them into the curriculum, and planning habituation activities that are appropriate to the characteristics of early childhood development. Research by Rarasati et al. (2025) reinforces these findings by showing that schools with clear character education planning documents tend to be more consistent in their implementation. In terms of kindergarten, character education planning also reflects the principal's ability to translate macro character education policies into contextual and applicable micro practices.

The organization of character education reflects the extent to which the principal of Realfunrainbow Kindergarten in Salatiga City is able to build a collective work system that supports the integration of character values. Robbins and Coulter (2018) stated that organization aims to ensure that each individual within the organization understands their role and responsibilities in achieving common goals. In the kindergarten context, organizing character education cannot be the sole responsibility of the classroom teacher but must involve the entire school community. The principal plays a role in coordinating teachers, education personnel, and parents to achieve a shared perception and commitment to character education. Afifah and Sholeh (2023) emphasized that good organization allows character education to be implemented consistently and independently of specific individuals. Furthermore, Cinantya et al. (2024) emphasized that early childhood character education is ecosystemic, meaning it is influenced by the alignment of values between the school and the family. Similarly, the organization of character education at Realfunrainbow Kindergarten includes establishing communication mechanisms and collaboration with parents through habituation, parenting, and internship programs to strengthen character education. This



finding strengthens the argument that organizing is not only a structural issue, but also a cultural and relational one.

The mobilization stage is the heart of character education management because it is at this stage that character values are realized in real practice. Terry (2016) views mobilization as an effort to direct and motivate organizational members to be willing to carry out their tasks optimally. In character education, mobilization is highly dependent on the principal's leadership style. Transformational leadership has proven relevant in this context. Bass and Riggio (2014) emphasized that transformational leaders are capable of affecting the behavior of individuals in organizations through example, inspiration, and moral values. In the Realfunrainbow Kindergarten environment in Salatiga City, the principal's exemplary behavior has a significant impact because early childhood learns primarily through imitation and habituation.

Mahendra (2025) found that daily habituation activities in PAUD will be effective if supported by the commitment and consistency of the entire school environment community. The principal acts as a driving force, ensuring that character values are not only taught but also lived out in the school culture. The findings of Arrasyid and Karwanto (2025) also show that the principal's support for teacher creativity in integrating character education is a key factor in the program's successful implementation. The character education initiative at Realfunrainbow Kindergarten in Salatiga City reflects the principal's leadership quality in building shared commitment and internalizing character values in daily practice both in class, outside of class, and in the surrounding environment.

Control is the stage that ensures that character education runs according to planned objectives. Robbins and Coulter (2018) explain that control includes monitoring, evaluation, and corrective action on program implementation. In character education at Realfunrainbow Kindergarten in Salatiga City, control is carried out through academic and managerial supervision that focuses on the process, not solely on the results. The principal observes the implementation of learning and habituation activities to assess the consistency of character value integration. Arrasyid and Karwanto (2025) emphasize that developmental supervision is more effective in improving the quality of character education than a purely control-based approach. Evaluation of character education in kindergarten also requires a qualitative approach that is sensitive to child development. Lickona (2018) emphasizes that the success of character education must be seen as a long-term process that requires continuous reflection and improvement. Therefore, control of character education in kindergarten is an important instrument to ensure the continuity and quality of the program, as well as a basis for the principal's managerial decision-making.

Overall, this discussion shows that the integration of character education at Realfunrainbow Kindergarten in Salatiga City is largely determined by the principal's ability to carry out comprehensive management functions. The four stages of management, namely planning, organizing, mobilizing, and controlling, do not stand alone but form a unified system that influences each other. This finding strengthens the theory of educational management that positions the principal as a strategic actor in shaping school culture. Character education at Realfunrainbow Kindergarten in Salatiga City will not run optimally without the principal's visionary, participatory, and consistent leadership in managing all educational resources.

The study offers theoretical and practical insights that support the development of character education management in kindergartens. These implications emphasize the article's contribution to strengthening early childhood education management studies, particularly in



the context of the principal's role as a strategic actor in character education integration. Theoretically, the results of this study strengthen and expand the concept of educational management that positions the principal as a learning leader and driver of school culture. The findings show that the integration of character education in Realfunrainbow Kindergarten in Salatiga City runs effectively through the stages of planning, organizing, mobilizing, and controlling. This indicates that classical managerial functions (POAC) remain relevant and applicable within early childhood education settings.

This study makes a theoretical contribution by emphasizing that character education in kindergarten cannot be understood solely as a pedagogical process, but also as a managerial process that requires visionary and systemic leadership. These findings reinforce Lickona's (2018) view, which underscores the significance of a comprehensive character education approach while reinforcing transformational leadership theory in the context of early childhood education (PAUD), which has received relatively limited in-depth study. Furthermore, this study demonstrates that the principal of Realfunrainbow Kindergarten in Salatiga City performs a dual function as both a manager and a moral exemplar. This enriches the theoretical discourse on educational leadership by adding moral and character dimensions as integral parts of the principal's managerial function. Thus, this study contributes to developing a conceptual framework for character education management that is contextualized to the developmental characteristics of kindergarten.

Practically, the findings of the present research provide strategic references for kindergarten principals in designing and implementing character education systematically and sustainably. Principals are expected to prioritize character education within the school's vision and mission and integrate it into all school programs and activities. Another practical implication is the importance of improving the managerial and leadership competencies of kindergarten principals, particularly in character-based planning, human resource management, and character education supervision. Principals are expected to cultivate a conducive school culture by serving as role models, engaging in effective communication, and collaborating with teachers and parents.

For kindergarten teachers, the results of this study provide an understanding that character education is not an individual task, but rather part of a collectively managed school system. Teachers are expected to be able to integrate character values into thematic learning, play activities, and daily habits with the full support of the principal. Furthermore, practical implications are also aimed at educational policymakers, particularly in designing training programs and professional development for kindergarten principals. Policies to improve the quality of early childhood education (PAUD) need to include aspects of character education management as a core competency for principals, so that the integration of character education can be carried out consistently and sustainably across all kindergarten educational units.

Conclusion

This study confirms that internships serve as an innovative and effective strategy for strengthening character education in early childhood at TK Realfunrainbow, Salatiga. The principal systematically applied the management functions of planning, organizing, mobilizing, and controlling to integrate internships into the school's character education framework. The internship program, conducted in collaboration with local SMEs, provided children with experiential learning opportunities in real work environments that were safe and developmentally appropriate. This distinctive initiative fostered independence, discipline,



responsibility, and cooperation, while also reflecting Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and the concept of Situated Learning, where values are internalized through authentic social contexts.

Beyond the internship program, the study demonstrates that character education in kindergarten cannot run optimally without effective school management. At the planning stage, the principal formulated vision, mission, and programs oriented toward character development. Organizing emphasized collaboration among teachers, staff, and parents, while mobilizing relied on transformational leadership to motivate and exemplify character-based practices. Controlling was carried out through supervision, evaluation, and continuous improvement, ensuring alignment with objectives.

Overall, the integration of character education at TK Realfunrainbow is a systemic process requiring visionary leadership, participatory involvement, and consistent evaluation. This study emphasizes that character education is not an additional program but the core of kindergarten management, oriented toward developing children's life skills and moral values from an early age.

Recommendation

In response to the research findings, it is recommended that the strengthening of character education in early childhood education institutions be further enhanced through the collaborative involvement of all stakeholders. School principals need to reinforce the planning of character education by integrating it more systematically into the school-level curriculum documents as written guidelines that ensure clarity of direction and program sustainability. Teachers are expected to maintain consistency in implementing character education in learning activities and daily practices, as well as to strengthen communication with parents to ensure continuity of character development between school and home. Parents are encouraged to be more actively involved in school programs and to consistently apply character education within the family environment. In addition, foundations and school committees are expected to provide more optimal support, particularly in the provision of facilities and infrastructure that support character-building activities. For future researchers, it is suggested to conduct more in-depth studies on the integration of character education within early childhood education curriculum documents, as well as to employ quantitative or mixed-methods approaches to measure the effectiveness of character education programs more comprehensively.

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