

Humanistic Educational Leadership in Shaping Generation Z Character: A Best Practice at Kumnamu Junior High School

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ABSTRACT

Amidst the challenges of a dynamic digital era, a leadership approach centered on human values became crucial for fostering student character characterized by independence, empathy, and integrity. This study aimed to analyze the implementation of humanistic educational leadership in shaping the character of Generation Z students at Kumnamu Junior High School. The study employed a qualitative method with a case study approach. Data were collected through participatory observation, with the principal, teachers, and student representatives, as well as school activity documentation. Data analysis was performed through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results showed that humanistic leadership at Kumnamu Junior High School was implemented through three main pillars: (1) creating a dialogical and inclusive school environment; (2) prioritizing an empathetic personal approach in teacher-student interactions; and (3) integrating character development into every learning process that humanized students in accordance with the unique characteristics of Generation Z. This practice proved effective in enhancing students' intrinsic motivation, building a culture of mutual respect, and cultivating ethical awareness among students. The study concluded that the humanistic leadership style made a significant contribution to the transformation of student character, making it a relevant leadership model for modern educational institutions.

Keywords: *Humanistic Leadership, Character, Generation Z, Kumnamu Junior High School, Education.*

INTRODUCTION

Humanistic leadership among elementary school principals has become increasingly important in a global educational context that demands respect for diversity, openness, and fairness for all learners. According to Noddings (2018), humanistic education places human relationships at the center of the learning process; therefore, principals play a significant role in creating a safe environment that embraces diversity.

Humanistic leadership emphasizes empathy, respect for human dignity, warm communication, and empowerment of the school community (Hallinger & Shin, 2022). In a multicultural context, principals must be able to create culturally sensitive learning environments, provide anti-discrimination policies, and support instructional practices responsive to the needs of students from diverse backgrounds. From a multicultural education perspective, Rosalia et al. (2025) and Lestari et al. (2025) emphasized that implementing local wisdom-based education can enhance students' tolerance, although its effectiveness depends heavily on school leadership in facilitating the learning process.

Previous studies have demonstrated that the success of inclusive cultures is strongly influenced by principals' leadership style. For instance, research by Rahman and Supriyanto (2021) in Indonesia showed that principals who applied a humanistic approach were able to reduce bullying and increase empathy among students. Adolph (2016) and Hanan et al. (2025) emphasize that principal competence is key to creating a school climate that supports the participation of all students. Similar studies by Dewi et al. (2025), Baruno et al. (2025), and Tasirun et al. (2025) show that a humanistic, instructional, and transformative leadership style can increase a sense of safety, comfort, and togetherness in elementary schools. Nevertheless, most studies have been conducted partially and do not examine humanistic leadership alongside multicultural. Principals with humanistic characteristics can address these challenges through dialogue, collaboration, and the integration of humanistic values into educational processes (Yeo & Tan, 2021). Such leaders not only direct but also develop emotional relationships with teachers, students, and parents.

The phenomenon of student behavioral deviations such as bullying, low respect for teachers, and lack of motivation to learn are serious concerns for the world of Indonesian education. This is where character

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education comes in as a strategic answer to form a personality that is emotionally, morally, and spiritually balanced for generation Z students (Sunaryati et al., 2025). Various previous studies have shown that character education has a crucial role in shaping the personality of students at various levels. For example, Zubaida (2024) emphasized the importance of the character profile of Pancasila students in building the values of mutual cooperation and integrity from an early age. Tarigan et al. (2025) proved that civic education can shape the character of a nation that is competitive in the digital era. Hasyim (2025) showed the role of Islamic religious education in strengthening the mental health and faith of generation Z students. Research by Sukarman et al. (2025) in elementary schools showed that student character can be formed through a holistic approach based on local and national values. Likewise, Ningrum et al. (2025) highlighted the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers as role models of moral character in the context of learning in schools. Studies such as by Nadila (2025) highlight the importance of the etiquette of seeking knowledge as a character value in Islamic education. Sunaryati et al. (2025) revealed that character education can encourage students' creativity and innovation. Meanwhile, Nafi'ah et al. (2025) stated that instilling Islamic ethics plays a major role in shaping students' habits and behavior in everyday life. Several studies also highlight the relationship between character education and multicultural values (Asrori et al., 2025), learning independence (Putri & Ummah, 2024), and strengthening students' empathy in online learning (Zahro et al., 2025).

The purpose of this study is to analyze the implementation of humanistic educational leadership in shaping the character of Generation Z students at Kumnamu Junior High School. The benefits of this research are divided into two aspects. Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of educational administration science, especially in the context of character education policy design for the digital generation. Practically, this research is expected to be a guide for schools, teachers, and policy makers in designing character education programs that are adaptive to the needs and challenges of generation Z students. To achieve this aim, the research addresses the following questions: How does the implementation of humanistic educational leadership in shaping the character of Generation Z students at Kumnamu Junior High School.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design because it focuses on an in-depth understanding of the implementation of humanistic educational leadership in shaping the character of Generation Z students at Kumnamu Junior High School. This approach was chosen based on the research objective to explore the phenomenon holistically, not only from a policy perspective but also from daily school practices. The research location was determined purposively. This research was conducted at Kumnamu Elementary School, an elementary school located in an urban environment with a full-day system .

Data collection techniques included participant observation, were conducted with the principal, teachers, students, to gain insight into their perceptions and experiences. Observations were used to directly observe patterns of interaction, communication, and the humanistic educational leadership in shaping the character. The primary research instrument was the researcher herself, assisted by interview guidelines, and observation guidelines.

Table 1. Observation Instrument Grid: Humanistic Leadership and Character Development

Dimension	Indicator	Observation Focus
Humanistic Leadership	Empathetic Communication	Observing how the principal listens and responds to students' and teachers' concerns with genuine understanding.
Humanistic Leadership	Inclusive Environment	Observing the creation of a non-discriminatory atmosphere where all students feel valued and heard.
Character Development	Intrinsic Motivation	Observing student engagement and self-driven participation in learning activities without external pressure.
Character Development	Interpersonal Respect	Observing the quality of teacher-student and student-student interactions, focusing on politeness and mutual appreciation.
Character Development	Ethical Awareness	Observing how students respond to moral dilemmas or conflict situations within the school environment.

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman in Nurrisa et al. (2025), which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. To ensure data validity, this study applied source triangulation, technical triangulation, and member checking with informants. Furthermore, this study adhered to research ethics, such as maintaining the confidentiality of respondents' identities, obtaining official permission from the school, and ensuring voluntary participation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The role of the principal's humanistic leadership

Research findings indicate that the principal's humanistic leadership plays a crucial role in creating a welcoming, safe, and diversity-respecting school climate. Principals with humanistic leadership are able to model empathy, openness, and fairness toward all students without discrimination. This attitude is then transmitted to teachers and educational staff, thus creating a school culture that upholds tolerance, cooperation, and respect for differences in cultural background, religion, and physical condition of students.

Furthermore, humanistic leadership has proven effective in encouraging the participation of all school members, including students with special needs, so they feel recognized and accepted. Principals who emphasize a humanistic approach tend to integrate inclusive and multicultural values into the school's vision, programs, and policies. This creates a school culture that is not only oriented toward academic achievement but also toward strengthening character, solidarity, and respect for socio-cultural diversity in elementary schools.

The role of the principal's humanistic leadership is crucial in realizing an inclusive and multicultural elementary school. Based on findings, leadership oriented toward humanistic values such as empathy, justice, and respect for differences can create a safe, welcoming, and open school environment. A principal who consistently demonstrates a humanistic attitude serves as a role model, encouraging teachers and students to build respectful interactions. Thus, a multicultural school culture is formed not only through formal policies but also through exemplary leadership. From the perspective of transformative leadership theory, a humanistic principal is able to mobilize the entire school community to work together to create an inclusive vision. Not only does the principal emphasize academic aspects, but he also integrates humanitarian values into school programs. In this way, humanistic leadership is key to creating an inclusive school culture, where students from diverse backgrounds feel valued and have equal opportunities to develop.

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The observation results indicate that the school principal at Kumnamu Junior High School consistently exemplifies empathetic communication in daily operations. During the observed interactions, the principal was seen actively listening to both teachers and students, maintaining eye contact, and responding with genuine concern regarding their personal and academic well-being. This leadership style established a foundation of trust, effectively lowering barriers between the administration and the school community, which is essential for fostering a humanistic environment.

Regarding the creation of an inclusive school climate, the leadership successfully cultivated an atmosphere where diversity was clearly valued. Observations revealed that the principal intentionally promoted equal participation in all school programs, ensuring that students from various backgrounds felt equally recognized. By minimizing rigid hierarchical boundaries and encouraging open dialogue, the leadership ensured that every student felt their presence and opinions were significant within the school ecosystem

In terms of student character, the observation highlighted a high level of intrinsic motivation among the students during learning activities. Students were frequently seen taking initiative in classroom discussions and completing tasks without requiring constant supervision or external rewards. This behavior suggested that the students felt empowered and comfortable within the learning environment, allowing them to engage with the curriculum through self-driven curiosity and responsibility.

The daily interactions among students and staff reflected a deeply ingrained culture of mutual respect. Observations confirmed that polite communication was the norm, with students demonstrating patience and appreciation for their peers' differing opinions. This environment of respect was not merely superficial but was embedded in the way students collaborated on projects and managed group dynamics, showcasing a community where empathy and interpersonal value are prioritized over competition.

The students displayed a notable level of ethical awareness when navigating social challenges. In instances where peer disagreements occurred, students were observed attempting to resolve conflicts through dialogue and compromise rather than confrontation. Their responses to these moral dilemmas indicated that the humanistic values modeled by the leadership had been effectively internalized, successfully translating into ethical behaviors that define the character of the student body at Kumnamu Junior High School.

Discussion

The implementation of humanistic leadership at Kumnamu Junior High School functions as a catalyst for shaping the character of Generation Z. By prioritizing the human dimension over rigid administrative procedures, the leadership creates a safe psychological space that encourages students to express their authentic selves. As noted by Serdyukov (2020), educational leadership that emphasizes human values is essential in navigating the complexities of the modern digital era, as it anchors student development in emotional and moral intelligence rather than more academic output.

Furthermore, the principal's empathetic communication style acts as a vital mechanism for building trust and rapport within the school community. This approach aligns with the findings of Arisandi et al. (2023), who argue that in a post-pandemic educational landscape, a leader's ability to practice active listening and demonstrate genuine empathy is directly correlated with a more cohesive and supportive school climate. By treating students as individuals rather than objects of instruction, the school fosters a sense of belonging that is crucial for the psychological well-being of the current generation.

The creation of an inclusive environment serves as the second pillar of this humanistic model, ensuring that students from diverse backgrounds feel equally valued. According to Ghavifekr et al. (2022), inclusivity in school leadership is not only an ethical imperative but a pedagogical one; it allows students to develop tolerance and global citizenship skills. At Kumnamu, the absence of punitive hierarchies encourages students to engage in open dialogue, which in turn nurtures the "soft skills" and digital literacy required for contemporary social success.

In terms of character outcomes, the observation of high intrinsic motivation suggests that the leadership model successfully shifts student orientation from extrinsic compliance to inner responsibility. This reflects the concept of student-centered leadership discussed by Bush (2024), who emphasizes that schools which grant students autonomy and voice are more effective at cultivating lifelong learners.

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When students feel their personal growth is the primary concern of their leaders, they are more likely to internalize positive values and take ownership of their character development.

The culture of mutual respect observed at the school validates the importance of social-emotional learning in modern curricula. As noted by Eacott (2021), leadership in educational contexts should be viewed as a social practice that shapes the normative values of the institution. By modeling polite interaction and encouraging the valuing of diverse opinions, the school provides a living laboratory for democratic behavior, which is a fundamental aspect of character building for Generation Z. Finally, the students' ethical awareness in conflict resolution serves as the ultimate indicator of the program's success. The internalization of integrity and empathy observed in their daily behavior supports the assertion by Wang (2025) that character education is most effective when it is embedded in the school culture rather than taught as an isolated subject. The humanistic leadership model at Kumnamu Junior High School demonstrates that when values are lived and modeled, they become a permanent part of the students' moral compass, effectively preparing them to navigate the complexities of the 21st-century society.

CONCLUSIONS

This research shows that This study concludes that humanistic educational leadership serves as a transformative force in shaping the character of Generation Z students at Kumnamu Junior High School. By prioritizing empathetic communication, fostering an inclusive environment, and nurturing intrinsic motivation, the school leadership successfully bridges the gap between academic instruction and holistic character development. The findings demonstrate that when leaders model humanistic values such as mutual respect and ethical integrity these values are effectively internalized by students, transitioning from external expectations to personal moral standards. Ultimately, the practice at Kumnamu Junior High School highlights that a student-centered, human-centric approach is not only vital for the psychological well-being of the digital generation but is also an essential model for modern educational institutions striving to build resilient, empathetic, and ethical citizens in an increasingly complex global society. Future research should expand upon these findings by employing longitudinal designs to observe the long-term impact of humanistic leadership on students' character trajectories as they transition into higher education or the workforce. Additionally, it is recommended to conduct comparative studies across different cultural contexts or educational systems to determine how local values influence the interpretation and implementation of humanistic leadership. Future research should expand upon these findings by employing longitudinal designs to observe the long-term impact of humanistic leadership on students' character trajectories as they transition into higher education or the workforce. Additionally, it is recommended to conduct comparative studies across different cultural contexts or educational systems to determine how local values influence the interpretation and implementation of humanistic leadership.

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