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*By Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidoarjo*

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## Principal Interventions Transforming Student Integrity Through Cognitive And Affective Integration: Intervensi Kepala Sekolah Mentransformasi Integritas Siswa Melalui Integrasi Kognitif Dan Afektif

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### Abstract

**General Background** Good character values in the school environment depend significantly on the leadership within the institution, specifically the principal. **Specific Background** Character degradation at the vocational high school level has become a crucial issue requiring systematic value interventions. **Knowledge Gap** Most previous studies tend to treat principals' leadership as a single independent variable or analyze its macro linear outcomes without examining how structural policies transform into real value internalization. **Aims** This study analyzes the principal's strategic intervention in fostering students' character values at SMK Negeri 1 Marisa through the dimensions of moral knowing, feeling, and behavior. **Results** The strategy operates in three integrated stages where moral knowing develops through the internalization of positive habits. Subsequently, moral feeling emerges via empathy incubation within an inclusive culture. Finally, moral behavior is driven by a dual control system based on educational-religious sanctions. Furthermore, this strategy's success is determined by teacher competence in embedded moral management, the handling of vulnerable student characteristics, and the contextualization of national policies like the Pancasila Student Profile. **Novelty** This research formulates a comprehensive framework that transforms rigid structural policies into horizontal-collaborative actions by simultaneously addressing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects of character. **Implications** Character building in vocational schools requires a consistent ecosystem that integrates school management with students' sociological realities to produce graduates with strong integrity.

### Highlights

- A dual control system combining discipline cards and religious sanctions solidifies ethical behavior.
- Teachers acting as embedded moral coaches critically determine the success of value cultivation.
- Contextualizing national directives into local practices mitigates moral resistance from socioeconomically vulnerable youth.

### Keywords

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## Introduction

Good character values in the school environment are not solely determined by the existence of teachers in educating, directing, and even motivating. However, more than that, the decisive factor is the leadership within the school, namely the principal. This review is based on the realization of policies, both vertically and horizontally. Vertical policies are policies that come from the top level (e.g. the central government or the education office) that are instructive and hierarchical. Meanwhile, horizontal policy is the implementation of policies at the internal level of the school that involves interaction between principals, teachers, staff, and students. The principal is one part of the horizontal element in charge of implementing the vertical policy. In other words, the principal acts as a bridge that transforms direction from above into real action in the daily school environment, so that the formation of students' character does not only depend on the teacher but is greatly influenced by the principal's leadership. There is a significant relationship between the principal's leadership variable and teacher performance on the formation of student characteristics based on strengthening local culture [1], [2],[3].

Another thing that is a reference is that this moral environment is also proven to be inseparable from the strong influence of the principal's leadership behavior, the example of teachers (*Teacher Model*), as well as the school's culture in equipping students to adapt to the global environment [4]. At the operational level, principals are required to implement appropriate leadership strategies to identify value formation principles while mitigating obstacles involving interactions between principals, teachers, and students [5]. The impact of this initiative even has a wide chain effect on the quality of graduates, which is achieved through three dimensions of development: building the character of teachers, nurturing the character of education personnel, and maintaining the character of the students themselves [6]. This influence can also be reviewed from the administrative characteristics of the principal which specifically has a direct impact on the personal development of students at school [7],[8]. In the end, all of these leadership dimensions boil down to the aspect of personal ethics, where the principal is obliged to be an example (*Role Model*) that integrate personality and social competencies in the school environment [9],[10].

Interestingly, empirical facts also agree that character, which in principle must be strongly attached to students, is actually degraded due to uncondusive environmental stimulation. This decline in moral quality is often triggered by school policies that are not in harmony with the "Nawa Cita" of education, where there are four main factors that force students to commit bad character actions, ranging from the direction of policy to the weak integration of moral education [11]. This condition is exacerbated by educational practices and school policies that unconsciously contribute to deviant behavior of students in the learning environment [12]. The inability of policies to reflect the interconnection between individual character and the school environment results in the loss of supportive conditions for students' social-emotional development [13]. Students' academic failure is often misunderstood as a lack of moral character, even though it can be the impact of inappropriate sanctions policies in schools [14].

On the other hand, policies that focus too much on academic aspects without caring about character and citizenship development actually send the wrong message about the values that should be developed by students [15]. The implementation of rigid policies, such as sanctioning student expenditures, is often not simply a product of the student's own behavior, but the result of inappropriate educational philosophy and school policies [16]. As a result, students trapped in alternative school systems often bear the stigma and burden of identity politics due to policies that focus only on administrative hustle and bustle rather than student involvement in school procedures [17]. Student acts of defiance or rebellion are often often a backlash triggered by the structural injustices they experience within the school environment[18]. A narrative that constantly blames teachers and categorizes certain groups of students as "bad" further muddles the distortions in public policy reform in schools [19]. Ultimately, school safety governance through choice policies often fails to realize that the problem lies not in the label of "bad boys," but in the choice of policies that limit their character's room to move [20].

A considerable gap can be seen in the factual conditions at SMK Negeri 1 Marisa, where the great potential of the social capital of the Pohuwato community has not been fully actualized in the character of the students. Ideally, as the sole vocational institution in a strategic area, the school is expected to be able to integrate local wisdom into cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions as well as the *framework of Moral Knowing, Moral Feeling, and Moral Action* from Lickona. However, reality shows that there is a "broken link" in the process of internalizing these values. The fundamental problem found is the stagnation of values at the cognitive level (*knowing-that*), where students understand rules administratively but fail to transform them into moral *feelings* and automatic behaviors. The phenomenon of moral degradation such as low manners and learning motivation indicates that character education has been still passive obedience (heteronomous) which is highly dependent on external supervision. As a result, a situational behavior gap emerges: students tend to behave well when supervised, but experience a decline in integrity when in a free situation. This complexity is exacerbated by three determinant factors that have not synergized optimally. First, there is a gap in teacher competence, where the teaching of values is still often trapped in the delivery of theoretical material without a touch of *artistry* or emotional closeness that is able to move students' moral intuition. Second, the heterogeneity of students who have diverse socio-economic backgrounds creates a non-uniform response to value stimuli. Third, macro national policies are often difficult to adapt to local contexts without innovative leadership strategies.

Character degradation at the vocational high school level has become a crucial issue that requires systematic and sustainable value strengthening strategy interventions. Studies have shown that although vocational schools have a strategic role in creating a workforce, the reality on the ground often shows that character education for students in secondary vocational schools still faces major challenges in its implementation [21]. This is emphasized by the fact that the strategy for

implementing character education in vocational high schools still requires a more applicative and contextual model so that it is not just an administrative formality [22]. This phenomenon is very urgent considering that the competence of vocational school graduates is currently considered not to fully meet the character standards expected by the industrial world and society, so that the development of character-based assessment models is a need that cannot be postponed [23]. The complexity of character problems in vocational schools is also influenced by the age range of students (15-21 years old) who are in a crucial transition phase with varying levels of cognitive ability, so the evaluation of character strengthening programs must be carried out in depth [24]. This threat of degradation is even global, where problematic behaviour in vocational students if not handled appropriately can trigger a wider moral deterioration [25]. This decline in moral quality is not only a behavioral problem, but also a negative predictor of student academic performance due to increasing social deviance [26]. In Indonesia, efforts to mitigate this deterioration of character continue to be carried out through various curricular approaches, including the integration of civic values to reduce the rate of moral degradation in the school environment [27]. A comparison of education policies between Malaysia and Indonesia also confirms that character education in vocational secondary schools must be the main bulwark in the face of increasingly worrying moral decadence [28]. Without the right solution, the deterioration of character and academic performance will continue to overshadow public educational institutions [29]. Therefore, the empowerment of character education based on local wisdom and the professional role of teachers is the main key in responding to the fact of the degradation of the nation's character which is reflected in social conflicts and deviant behavior among adolescents today [30].

Therefore, a leadership strategy for the Principal is needed that is able to bridge the *gap* through a more contextual approach. The urgency of this research lies in the need to dissect how managerial strategies are articulated into a complete character structure, starting from the strengthening of *Moral Knowing*, the internalization of *Moral Feeling*, to the realization of *Moral Behavior*. Without synchronization between managerial strategies and the sociological reality of students, the contribution of SMK Negeri 1 Marisa in producing graduates with integrity and ready to work will be difficult to achieve optimally. Although the above literature mapping has confirmed the significance of the role of school principals, there is a *fundamental research gap*. Most previous studies have tended to treat principals' leadership as a single independent variable or look at its impact in a linear-macro way. For this reason, this study is here to fill this gap by analyzing how structural policies are transformed into the internalization of real value as part of the novelty in this study. For this reason, this study focuses on examining the principal's strategy in developing character values through the integration of the dimensions of *moral knowing*, *moral feeling*, and *moral behavior*. In addition, this study also aims to analyze in depth the determinants that determine the success of the strategy, which includes aspects of teacher competence, unique characteristics of students, and harmonization of national policies at SMK Negeri 1 Marisa.

## Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study type to explore in depth managerial strategies in a specific context at SMK Negeri 1 Marisa, considering that case studies are not just a methodological choice but a comprehensive qualitative research type [31]. The use of case studies in this study was possible due to the specificity and limitations of the cases investigated in depth [32]. This methodology provides a tool for researchers to systematically study complex phenomena in their original context [33]. As an empirical investigation, the qualitative case study design in this study is focused on full concentration on the case being studied [34]. Data collection techniques were carried out through participatory observation, in-depth interviews (*in-depth interview*), and documentation studies to determine whether qualitative case studies are the most appropriate method for answering research questions [35]. The data sources in this study consist of primary data obtained directly from key informants, namely school principals, deputy principals (Wakasek), teachers, and students, as well as secondary data sources derived from policy and regulatory documents. This approach was chosen because the case study methodology is very appropriate for qualitatively analyzing behavioral and managerial phenomena in the workplace [36].

In its implementation, the main instrument in this qualitative research is the researcher himself (*human instrument*) as a data collector and analyst, assisted by supporting instruments in the form of semistructured interview guidelines, observation guidesheets, and documentation checklists. The interview guidelines are specifically designed to explore the principal's managerial strategy as viewed from the dimensions of *moral knowing* (ethical awareness and value-based decision-making), *moral feeling* (commitment, empathy, and moral motivation), and *moral behavior* (program implementation and real example in schools). This instrument is aligned with an observation guidesheet to directly observe the daily managerial behavior of school principals, social interaction between school residents, work culture atmosphere, and actualization of moral policies in instructional activities and extracurricular activities at SMK Negeri 1 Marisa. In addition, the documentation study guide is used as a complementary instrument to review formal documents such as the Strategic Plan (Renstra), the Education Unit Curriculum, discipline, management meeting notes, and annual performance evaluation reports.

Furthermore, the data analysis technique in this study refers to an interactive model which includes data condensation (*Data Condensation*), data presentation (*Data Display*), and conclusion withdrawal and verification. The analysis process in this study involves using the logic of induction and deduction in a balanced manner to produce strong conclusions [37]. In the condensation stage, the researcher sorts and abstracts the raw data from the field to focus on the dimensions *moral knowing*, *feeling*, *behavior*, as well as their determinant factors through in-case analysis (*within-case analysis*) deep [38]. The data is then presented in the form of a descriptive narrative and a categorization matrix to build explanatory patterns through techniques *pattern matching* [39]. To ensure the validity of the data (*trustworthiness*), this study applies source and technique triangulation techniques, as well as conducting a critical review of research reports to ensure the suitability between methods and results [40]. In addition, it is carried out *member check* to ensure that the researcher's interpretation

is in line with the perspective of the informants at the research site to maintain the integrity of the qualitative case study results.

## Results and Discussion

### A. School Principal's Strategy in Developing Character Values Through Moral Knowing, Through Moral Feeling and Moral Behavior

Moral knowledge is a cognitive dimension in character formation that includes a rational understanding of ethical principles, moral values, and the decision-making process based on moral considerations. According to Lickona, moral knowledge consists of six main interrelated components: moral awareness, moral value knowledge, perspective determination, moral thinking, moral decision-making, and self-knowledge. These six components form the essential cognitive foundation for the development of a wholesome moral character [41]. The findings of the research at SMK Negeri 1 Marisa show that the understanding of character values develops through student involvement in various experiences that continue to be repeated in the school environment. Grades are not positioned as stand-alone material, but are present in real life in learning, rules, and routine activities. Through these experiences, students begin to recognize the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Over time, some students not only follow the rules, but begin to understand the reasons behind them, especially when confronted with the consequences of their actions. The development of this understanding does not take place evenly: there is a gap between students who have been able to reflect on the deep meaning of a value and students who are still in the stage of passive obedience without reflection. The more often students are faced with situations that demand attitude choices, the stronger their ability to build an understanding of values. This shows alignment with the Lickona framework, especially in the aspects of moral awareness and knowledge of moral values. The ability of students to recognize situations that contain a right-false dimension reflects moral awareness, while understanding the reasons behind the rules shows a strengthening of knowledge of moral values. However, the authors identified some critical gaps. First, moral knowledge in schools is often stuck in the delivery of explicit rules, even though its essence lies in the ability of students to distinguish right and wrong through intuitive practice that is tacit or implicit. This emphasizes that ethical sensitivity in educational practice requires the discovery of moral knowledge that is not merely theoretical, but is able to distinguish between explicit moral knowledge and implied moral knowledge in real action [42].

Second, the intensity of experiences that affect students' comprehension strengths reveals the gap between theoretical knowledge (knowing-that) and the tendency to act (knowing-to). Moral strengthening in the field is still only touching on the information aspect, while the success of character education is measured by the extent to which the knowledge is able to move the minds of students to do virtue consciously. Moral knowledge is seen as a type of normative knowledge that specifically directs a person to act, as opposed to simply knowing information or knowing how to do something [43]. Third, there is a significant gap in the relationship between understanding, feelings, and moral behavior influenced by the role of the immediate environment, especially in the scope of family development which is the initial foundation for the formation of children's character [44] [45]. Fourth, the consciousness of students that arises through the process of ups and downs when facing the consequences of actions shows that moral reasoning is still highly dependent on external stimuli, having not yet achieved independent reasoning based on serious reflection on everyday moral cases [46]. This gap is also influenced by differences in the way individuals learn and make moral choices, where approaches to moral knowledge at the secondary school level can differ based on the construction of identity and social experience of each subject [47]. The dimension of moral knowing shows a direction that is in line with Lickona's theoretical construction, although not all components are fully developed in the field. The contribution of this research is to identify that the implementation of moral knowing-based character education in secondary schools needs to bridge students' cognitive understanding into curricular and extracurricular programs that are more applicable and reflective [48]. It is not enough to simply teach moral knowledge, but it must be transformed into procedural knowledge that is integrated in concrete ethical experience. In other words, schools must create situations that constantly demand students to not only know what is right, but also why something is right and how to apply it in various life contexts.

Furthermore, in the aspect: Moral feelings are the affective dimension of character that plays an important role in motivating individuals to act in accordance with their moral knowledge. According to Lickona, there are six fundamental aspects of moral feelings that complement each other: conscience as a unifier between the cognitive awareness of truth and the emotional drive to act rightly; self-esteem as a psychological foundation that allows individuals to maintain their moral principles in the midst of social pressure; empathy that allows one to feel and respond to the emotional state of another; a love of goodness that goes beyond external obligations reflects an intrinsic motivation; self-control as a mechanism for regulating emotions and impulses; and humility that facilitates the recognition of mistakes and self-improvement. These six aspects form an affective system that encourages the actualization of moral values in real behavior [41]. The findings of the research at SMK Negeri 1 Marisa show that values begin to transform into a more personal awareness. Students not only get to know the grades, but begin to feel them in the social relationships they build in school. The environment that is formed provides space for the emergence of mutual respect and care. In daily interactions, students begin to show sensitivity to the condition of their friends, as well as feel discomfort when committing violations. This change indicates that values have moved into a deeper emotional dimension. However, the emotional responses that emerge are not uniform: some quickly show empathy, others take longer. These differences have to do with each student's social experience. In situations where the relationship between teacher and student is well established and warm, values tend to be more readily accepted and lived as part of their lives, rather than as external demands.

Strong linkage with Lickona's affective construction. The change when students begin to feel value in social relations marks the development of conscience as a link between moral understanding and inner drive. The emergence of mutual respect

and concern reflects the development of empathy, although the levels are not uniform. The warm relationship between teachers and students contributes to the growth of a love for kindness. However, the authors identified some important gaps. First, there is a gap between cognitive moral knowledge and the internalization of autonomous moral feelings. Moral feelings are not mere raw emotions, but a planned capacity to experience morality as a form of respect for value itself, which must be distinguished from mere ordinary social sentiments [49]. Moral feelings in this context serve as a reinforcement of the crucial emotional aspect in shaping one's character beyond mere intellectual understanding [50].

Furthermore, the findings regarding the difference in the speed of empathy between students showed that there was a gap in the process of cultivating or cultivating moral feelings that was not evenly distributed. This gap proves that moral feelings are not something static, but something that can be formed and expanded through habituation methods and the expansion of the range of empathy in everyday life [51]. It also relates to the gap between moral thought and actual action, where moral feelings act as a bridge that unites emotional responses with moral attitudes that are central to one's thoughts and actions [52]. In a more philosophical view, this gap shows that moral judgment is not just an intellectual belief, but rather a living idea copied from deeply felt sentiments in social interactions [53]. Third, the finding that the warm relationship between teachers and students facilitates the appreciation of values underlines the gap in students' moral motivation which is often still heteronomous (from the outside). Theoretically, true moral motivation arises from a sense of respect for moral law that is fostered through an awareness of responsibility as moral beings [54]. This gap shows the need for schools to teach that moral feelings are flexible and can be shaped by the beliefs that students have, so that they can better manage moral dilemmas through a strong connection between reason and feelings [55]. Moral Feeling: This overall pattern shows that the research findings move in line with Lickona's theoretical framework, with the emphasis that the dimension of moral feeling develops through the quality of social interaction and emotional experiences that students experience in school life. The contribution of this study is to show that the success of character education in this dimension is measured by the extent to which schools are able to transform values from mere external demands to an organic part of students' emotional lives. Moral feelings should not be viewed as complementary, but as the main driving force that transforms knowledge into action. Thus, the principal's strategy should be designed to build a warm, inclusive, and consistent affective climate so that students not only know the value but also feel it as an inner need.

Moral action is the concrete realization of moral knowledge and feelings in real behavior. According to Lickona, there are three key elements that allow the realization of effective moral action. Moral competence includes a variety of practical skills such as conflict resolution, assertive communication, and collaboration, which serve as tools for actualizing moral values in concrete situations. Moral desire reflects an intrinsic determination and motivation to maintain moral principles despite facing various challenges, temptations, or social pressures. Moral habits, on the other hand, are the result of the internalization of values that have become automatic patterns of behavior, allowing individuals to act ethically consistently without the need for a conscious consideration process each time. These three components interact with each other to form a system that ensures harmony between moral understanding, emotional drives, and real behavior in everyday life [41]. The findings of the research at SMK Negeri 1 Marisa show that values have begun to transform into real actions. Various school activities such as scouting, class pickets, and other routine activities become a space for students to practice discipline, responsibility, and cooperation. The change in behavior is quite obvious in terms of rule compliance and active participation. However, the consistency of this behavior has not been fully formed independently. Phenomena in the field show a situational behavior gap: students tend to show good behavior when under supervision, but experience a decrease in the quality of action when the situation becomes freer. Relatively stable behavior is generally shown by students who already have a better understanding and stronger emotional involvement with the values being performed.

Closely related to Lickona's conception of moral action. The manifestation of behavior through collective activities reflects the development of moral competence, which is seen in the ability to cooperate, obey rules, and carry out responsibilities operationally. However, the tendency of students to exhibit positive behavior more strongly in structured and supervised situations indicates that moral desire has not yet been fully rooted as a stable intrinsic impulse. The process of forming moral habits has not yet reached the stage of complete internalization. The authors identified several critical gaps. First, the situational behavior gap shows that moral behavior is not just a matter of technical compliance, but rather the result of the complex interaction between moral standards and moral emotions that are the driving force behind one's actions [56]. This consistency gap indicates that stable behavior can only be achieved if the action has been integrated with the individual's moral identity, so that the behavior that arises is not due to external pressures but an internal impulse to maintain a moral self-concept [57]. Second, the finding that stable behavior is generally demonstrated by students with strong emotional understanding and involvement identifies the gap between verbal regulation (rules) and the moral intuition underlying daily behavior. Moral behavior is often still stuck at the level of behavior set by the school's verbal rules, even though unique moral behavior should stem from intuition and affective capacity that goes beyond mere obedience to instructions [58]. In this context, the situational behavior gap found at SMKN 1 Marisa challenges traditional assumptions about character that are considered fixed personality traits; Rather, these findings reinforce the view that environmental situations have a significant influence on the consistency of a person's character. The role of the religious environment in schools also influences the moral decision-making process, where belief in authority and the value of loyalty are additional motives for students to behave [59]. Third, the findings on the need for continuous strengthening show that there is a gap in the maintenance of students' moral self. This gap suggests that past moral actions can influence future behavioral motivations, in which students need symbols of moral success to remain consistent in the path of good character [60]. In addition, there is a gap between students' moral estimates and their actual moral capacity when faced with real dilemmas, which is influenced by the role of affective or emotional responses when the action is performed [61]. Moral Behavior: These findings show that moral actions develop gradually through a process of repetitive habituation, where the intensity of experience, the strengthening of the environment, and the quality of individual involvement are decisive factors in shaping the consistency of ethical behavior. The contribution of this research is to affirm that the success of character education in this behavior dimension requires the design of program applications that facilitate the development of behavior gradually and thoroughly

so that the values practiced can take root into a complete personality [62]. The formation of moral behavior in schools must be understood as a dynamic process that bridges the gap between school rules, personal identity, and consistent environmental conditioning. Thus, the principal's strategy is not enough to rely only on supervision, but must build a system that encourages students' moral autonomy through internal reinforcement and symbols of moral success. Reconstructing the review of findings and the gap approach of the research theory, the novelty found in this part of the strategy can be seen in the chart image below.

Reconstructing the review of findings and the gap approach of the research theory, the novelty found in this part of the strategy can be seen in the chart image below.

**Figure 1.** Findings of Principal Strategic Intervention Indicators

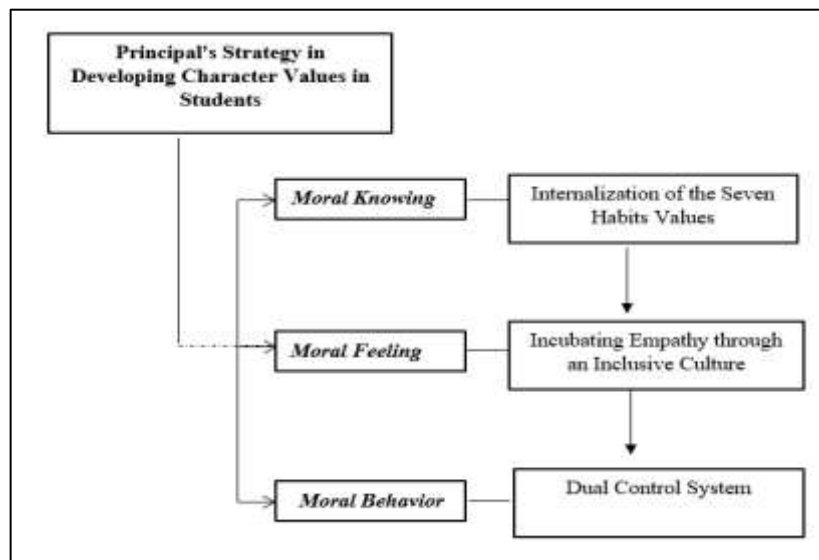


Figure 1 presents the findings of the principal's strategy indicators in developing character values in students which are divided into three main stages that are integrated with each other. The first stage is Moral Knowing which is internalized through the values of "Seven Habits of Indonesian Children" (Seven Habits Values), where the principal instills moral understanding in students through daily habits such as morning apples and routine activities that reflect the seven positive habits in order to build an initial awareness of national norms and values. The second stage is Moral Feeling which is carried out by incubating empathy through an inclusive culture, namely the principal creates a school environment that respects differences across religions and holds social activities that aim to foster students' emotional sensitivity and empathy for others, so that the affective aspects of character are built naturally. The third stage is Moral Behavior which is realized through the application of the Dual Control System, which is a combination of the use of control cards as a form of written discipline and educational-religious sanctions such as memorization of the Qur'an, which acts to shape students' real behavior while strengthening their spiritual awareness. These three indicators are sequentially and continuously the foundation of the principal's strategy in developing student character.

## **B. Factors that Determine the Principal's Strategy in Developing Character Values in terms of Teacher Competence, Student Character and National Policy.**

Teacher competence is theoretically a fundamental factor in improving the quality of education, because teachers are the main implementers in the learning process. The quality of learning that occurs in the classroom is greatly influenced by the pedagogical, professional, social, and personality abilities that teachers have. In this context, the principal has the responsibility to ensure the professional development of teachers through academic supervision and continuous coaching. The process is not only oriented towards improving technical skills, but also on strengthening teachers' reflection and adaptation to educational changes. Thus, improving the quality of education is closely related to the extent to which school principals are able to encourage the systematic improvement of teacher competence [63]. The findings of the research at SMK Negeri 1 Marisa show that teachers are a very crucial factor in bringing character values into students' lives, where their role goes beyond just delivering academic material through real daily attitudes and interactions. Differences in teachers' ability to build personal relationships with students have a direct impact on the quality of moral experiences received. Teachers who are able to create close and warm interactions tend to be more successful in instilling character values. It is strongly related to Susanto's view of the strategic position of teachers as the main actor in determining the quality of learning and the formation of values. The role of teachers, which do not stop at the delivery of material, but extend to the representation of values through daily attitudes and interactions, shows that personality and social competence have an equally important contribution as pedagogic and professional competence. Variations in teachers' ability to build relationships with students have direct implications for the quality of the learning experience received, where interactional closeness is a medium that strengthens students' acceptance and appreciation of values. This condition shows that the effectiveness of value cultivation is not only determined by mastery of learning methods, but also by the ability of teachers to present themselves as a consistent figure between speech and action. Within this framework, the role of school principals in encouraging the development of teachers' competencies through continuous supervision and coaching is significant, especially in strengthening teachers' reflective and adaptive capacity to educational dynamics.

In this section, there is a critical gap gap. First, there is a gap between the mastery of formal pedagogic competencies and *theartistry* or the art of teaching that is intuitive and difficult to articulate. The success of character education depends not only on the science of teaching (curriculum), but on the teacher's ability to manage interpersonal relationships that demand negotiation skills, the creation of social networks in the classroom, and the ability to maintain long-term relationships with students [64]. Teacher competence in this context must be seen as a whole unit that includes subject knowledge as well as practical skills in carrying out the profession in the field [65]. Second, differences in the quality of student experience due to variations in teachers' abilities show that there is a gap in the level of teacher self-efficacy (*Teacher Efficacy*) and competency standards. Teachers' effectiveness in instilling value is greatly influenced by their belief in their own ability to make a positive impact, which ultimately determines their competency in educational practice [66]. The gap also underscores the importance of more functional teacher education reforms to develop the competencies that are really needed in real practice in schools. In the midst of the development of the digital era, a new gap has emerged in the competence of digital content evaluation that requires teachers to have a combined skill set in guiding students in a modern learning environment [67].

Finally, the finding that close interaction is key to successful value instilling suggests that there is a gap in sustainable professional development that spans cross-cultural dimensions. This gap shows that teachers need support to meet the challenges of teaching diverse students through a change in thinking and multicultural approaches [68]. Third, the finding that close interaction is key to successful value instilling shows that there is a gap in sustainable professional development that includes cross-cultural dimensions. Teachers need support to face the challenges of teaching diverse students through changing ways of thinking and multicultural approaches [68]. Therefore, a measurable and observable teacher competency framework is needed, which includes generic subcompetencies as the basis for performance evaluation and national education policy development [69]. The technology factor was also found as a companion element that required an in-depth analysis related to the extent to which teachers' technological competence can support the process of internalizing values in schools [70].

The findings on the teacher competency indicators show alignment with the theoretical construction that places the teacher as the main determinant in the process of character formation in the educational environment. The contribution of this research is to reveal that the competence of teachers at SMK Negeri 1 Marisa must be understood as a combination of managerial skills, moral examples, and adaptability to social dynamics and technology in the educational space. Improving teacher competence is not enough only through technical training, but requires continuous coaching that touches on personality, relational, and reflective aspects so that teachers are able to become effective agents of character change. At the level of student character, this factor is both a challenge and a basis for designing adaptive learning strategies. Theoretically, the diversity of students' backgrounds, both in terms of interests, talents, and literacy and numeracy skills, requires a differentiated learning approach. In the context of vocational education, students are not only required to master academic aspects, but also practical competencies that are relevant to the needs of the world of work. This condition requires school principals to be able to direct learning practices that are responsive to the needs of students. Challenges such as low literacy and teachers' readiness to face curriculum changes are part of the dynamics that must be managed strategically in improving school quality [71]. The findings of the research at SMK Negeri 1 Marisa show that the background of students has a very strong influence on the character formation process, where each individual responds to values in a different way according to the experiences they have had before. These differences in background cause character development to not take place uniformly: some students are able to adapt and develop faster, while others require a more intensive, personalized, and ongoing coaching approach. This indicates the need for a deep understanding of student characteristics as the foundation of character education strategy design. The effectiveness of character education depends heavily on the extent to which schools consider the variables of the student's background and personal characteristics as a foundation in determining learning outcomes [72].

The characteristics of the student in this regard should be viewed as complex functions involving the temperament and readiness of the individual, which significantly determine the level of self-empowerment of themselves in the learning process [73]. Further, the authors identify several critical gaps. First, there is a gap between the input of students' innate characteristics and the design of the learning process which is often equalized. The difference in the speed of student responses identified gaps in the moral and career decision-making processes that were interactive. Students' interests and choices are influenced by the complex process of interaction between self-identity and their social environment [74]. The gap is also seen in how student characteristics affect teachers' predictions of their success, where factors such as gender and literacy achievement often create different perceptions in mentoring strategies [75]. In the context of modern learning, there is also a gap in the aspect of motivation and environmental perception, especially in high school students who demand more personalized feedback parameters to suit the unique needs of each individual [76]. Second, the finding that some students need an intensive approach shows that there is a gap between what students bring from home (especially from the family environment) and what happens during the learning process at school. Student satisfaction and success are not only determined by the initial capital they have, but are more influenced by the quality of interactions and events that occur during their education [77]. Therefore, it is important to conduct an in-depth review of dynamic student characteristics such as motivation, expectations, and time spent on moral tasks in order to achieve an equal distribution of character qualities [78]. The success factor of learning, both online and offline, ultimately remains rooted in the identification of the main characteristics of students that emerge during the educational process [79]. In the character indicators, students emphasized that the diversity of backgrounds is a reality that cannot be ignored in character education. The contribution of this study is to show that the characteristics of students at SMK Negeri 1 Marisa must be managed through a flexible and adaptive approach, in order to bridge the differences in their socio-economic backgrounds with the target of character achievement expected by the school [80]. Principals' strategies need to be designed to respond to individual student differences, for example through personal mentoring, character remedial programs, and the creation of a classroom climate that is inclusive and respectful of diversity.

National policies in the field of vocational education provide a strategic framework for school management, especially in an effort to align education with the needs of the business world and the industrial world. The policy of revitalizing vocational schools and strengthening vocational education emphasizes the importance of relevance between graduate competencies and job market demands. In addition, the implementation of a curriculum that is oriented towards flexibility and character strengthening requires school principals to be able to translate policies into operational and contextual programs. In this case, the principal acts as a liaison between macro policies and micro practices in schools, so that the success of policy implementation is highly dependent on the ability to adapt and innovate at the level of education units [71]. The findings of the research at SMK Negeri 1 Marisa show that national policies are the main legal and operational basis in the implementation of character education in schools, but the effectiveness of its implementation depends heavily on the ability of schools to translate these rules into real practice through adjustments that are relevant to the conditions of students. Policies will become more meaningful and applicable when presented in the form of experiences that are close to students' daily lives in the school environment. There is a gap between the main character values set by the Ministry of Education and the actualization of the policy at the level of the education unit, which is often still administrative. National policies require a transformational leadership strategy from school principals to unite central values with the unique characteristics of schools, especially in Eastern Indonesia, so that these values do not stop as mere formal documents [81]. The implementation of character strengthening policies (PPK) in primary and secondary schools is found to still have gaps in terms of achieving its ideal goals if it is not supported by program management that touches on the roots of school culture [82] [82]. Furthermore, the importance of presenting policies in students' daily experiences identifies the gap between macro policy design and the interconnection of individual and societal characters. Policy failures often occur due to a disconnect between what is planned at the national level and what students feel emotionally and socially in the classroom. The gap is also seen in the challenges of regional autonomy which sometimes threaten the viability of national policy priorities, so it is necessary to revitalize policies that are able to strengthen the concept of nationalism while maintaining the practice of local democracy in schools [83]. Character strengthening in response to the challenges of the times can only be effective and sustainable if the policy is integrated through habituation and the formation of a consistent school culture [84]. Finally, the translation of policies into real practice shows that there are gaps in policy development models based on specific local or religious values in each region. National policies will be stronger if they are based on values that are already alive in society, such as the values of Islamic education or certain school culture, which are able to bridge the vision of Indonesia 2045 with the moral reality of today's students [85]. National policy indicators show that the success of policies at SMK Negeri 1 Marisa is not determined by how strictly the school follows the central rules, but the extent to which the school is able to contextualize the standard into a stimulus of local innovation that is organic and has a direct impact on changing student behavior. The contribution of this research is to affirm that school principals must play the role of policy contextualization agents, not just rule implementers. National policies need to be translated into programs based on local wisdom, student needs, and real school conditions so that character values are not only taught but also lived.

**Figure 2.** Findings of Intervention Factors Inhibiting School Principals' Strategy

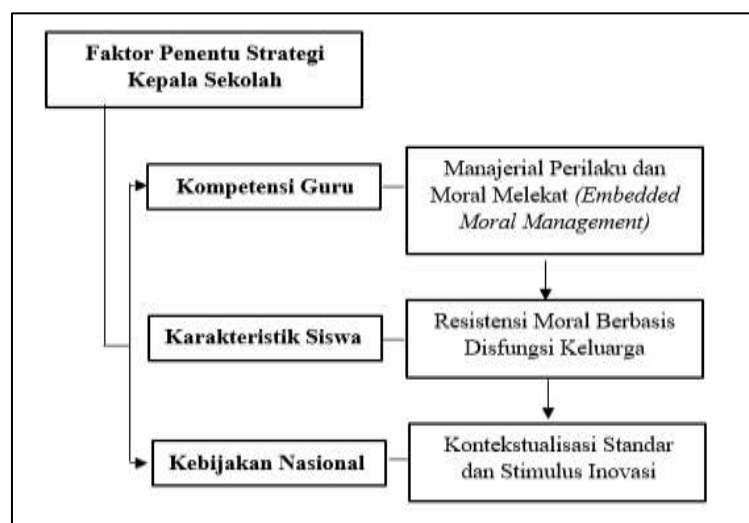


Figure 2 shows the findings of three main factors that are decisive and can act as an obstacle in the principal's strategy to develop character values in students. The first factor is teacher competence which contains inherent behavioral and moral managerial indicators called *embedded moral management*, meaning that teachers not only function as teachers but also as moral coaches who are intensively attached to students. However, if this competence is not possessed, it will become an obstacle because teachers are not able to supervise and guide student behavior consistently. The second factor is the characteristics of students which are characterized by moral resistance based on family dysfunction, namely students who come from less harmonious family backgrounds or *broken homes* tend to show rejection or indifference to the character values instilled by the school. This condition is a tough challenge that requires a personal and sustainable coaching approach. The third factor is national policies that are realized through standard-contextualization indicators and innovation stimulus, where policies such as the Pancasila Student Profile should be a driver of school innovation. However, if schools only apply it normatively without adjusting to local needs and student characteristics, then the policy can actually be an obstacle that limits the creativity and effectiveness of the principal's strategy. Thus, the three factors, namely teacher competence, student characteristics, and national policies, each with its specific indicators, simultaneously determine the success or not of the principal's strategy in developing character values, as well as being the main source of obstacles if not managed properly.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that the strategy of the principal of SMK Negeri 1 Marisa in developing students' character values is carried out through three integrated stages, namely *moral knowing* through the *hidden curriculum approach* (daily habituation and morning apple), *moral feeling* through empathy incubation (inclusive culture across religions and social activities), and *moral behavior* through a *dual control system* (Educational-Religious Control and Sanction Card). The success of this implementation is determined by three key factors: teacher competence through *embedded moral management*, student characteristics (handling moral resistance in *broken home* students), and national policies as a driver of innovation (contextualization of the Pancasila Student Profile). Theoretically, these findings enrich Thomas Lickona's character education model by showing that the internalization of moral values at the vocational school level requires an approach that is not only normative, but must be *embedded* in daily behavior management and supported by a *dual control system*. The crucial significance of these findings lies in the importance of personalization of character development that is adaptive to students' psychological vulnerabilities, as well as the flexibility of schools in translating national policies into grounded local practices. The practical implications of this study confirm that character building in vocational schools cannot rely on one-way instruction, but rather requires a consistent school ecosystem, teacher involvement as inherent moral coaches, and contextual innovation space. Thus, the systematic principal strategy at these three moral stages provides a strategic picture and shows a strong potential to become a model that can be replicated in developing students' character values holistically in the vocational school environment.

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