

Bulding Leadership in Junior High School Students Through Eco School Program: A Literature Review

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the efforts in developing students' leadership character at the junior high school level through the implementation of the Eco School program. Using a qualitative approach with a case study design, the research focuses on a selected junior high school that actively integrates environmental values into its curriculum and extracurricular activities. Data were collected through observation, interviews with teachers and students, and documentation analysis. The study reveals that the Eco School program plays a significant role in cultivating leadership values such as responsibility, collaboration, and initiative among students. The program's activities provide real-life contexts where students can exercise decision-making and problem-solving skills. The findings suggest that environmental education can be a strategic entry point for character education, especially in shaping leadership qualities. Further research is recommended to examine the long-term impact of such programs across different educational settings.

Keywords: Leadership, Character Building, Eco School, Environmental Education, Junior High School

INTRODUCTION

Leadership is one of the basic things that needs to be possessed to create a just and moral society (Martinek, Schilling, & Hellison, 2006). Leadership is a basic ability that needs to be trained from an early age, especially starting from adolescence, which is the most crucial transition period in human growth (Martinek, Schilling, & Hellison, 2006). The process of cultivating leadership character is a process that looks at human abilities to become leaders who can face the challenges of a dynamic world (Martinek, Schilling, & Hellison, 2006). The growth of leadership character can originate from various learning spaces, one of which is through the world of education. The world of education, for example schools, is a field that has great potential to develop leadership character, especially in teenagers. Adolescence in the world of education begins when children enter junior high school where the age range of students attending school is 12 to 14 years old. The important role of schools in building leadership character can be supported by implementing various interactive programs and curricula that

can help develop this character (Martinek, Schilling, & Hellison, 2006). One of the programs that has now been adapted by schools is the eco school program.

Eco school is one of the largest programs owned by global sustainable schools programme operated by Foundation for Environmental Education and has been implemented in 70 countries with a total of 56,000 participating schools (Eco-Schools, 2021). This knowledge-based and environmental conservation education program is seen as a form of increasing awareness of the importance of protecting the environment which is also related to sustainable consumption and production patterns listed in Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Cincera & Krajhanzl, 2013). The purpose of establishing the program eco school is one way to increase awareness and concern for the environment through learning and activities carried out in classes, schools and communities (Cincera & Krajhanzl, 2013).

Children's active participation in the Eco School program not only forms environmental awareness, but also strengthens the social learning process which is very important in leadership development. Children are given a real role as agents of change in their school environment and community. When students are involved in decision making, planning environmental projects, and implementing solutions to local issues, they directly train to become leaders who are able to think critically, work together, and convey ideas confidently (Barratt Hacking, Scott, & Lee, 2010). This process aligns with the constructivist approach to education, which states that children learn most effectively through meaningful direct experiences (Piaget, 1973).

Eco School also encourages the formation of an organizational structure in the form of *eco-committee*, consisting of students, teachers and representatives of the school community. Within this structure, students learn about inclusive and collaborative governance. They not only function as participants, but as leaders responsible for evaluation, reporting and developing environmental action strategies (Eco-Schools, 2021). Activities like this train participative leadership which is very important in the 21st century, when global challenges such as climate change and the ecological crisis demand leadership that is able to embrace teamwork and cross-sectoral approaches (UNESCO, 2017). According to research by Cincera et al. (2018), students involved in the Eco School program showed significant improvements in leadership aspects such as initiative, presentation abilities, and collaborative skills. They become more active in voicing opinions and show higher concern for social and environmental issues. This indicates that this program not only expands students' cognitive knowledge, but also shapes their affective and social dimensions. This is important because true leadership is not only determined by intellectual ability, but also by character, empathy, and willingness to serve (Greenleaf, 2002).

On the other hand, Eco School provides a safe space to learn from failure. When projects designed by students do not go as planned, teachers and facilitators can guide them to evaluate, reflect, and try again. A reflective process like this fosters *growth mindset* which is an important foundation for strong leadership (Dweck, 2006). Children learn that mistakes are not the end, but part of the process

of learning and self-improvement. This ability is very important in facing the complexity of the modern world which is full of uncertainty.

This program also integrates sustainability values in the decision-making process, so that the leadership that is built is not transactional, but transformational. Transformational leadership is characterized by the ability to inspire positive change, promote values, and have a long-term vision (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In this way, students not only learn to lead projects, but also internalize the vision for creating a sustainable future. These values are then carried over into their daily lives, both inside and outside the school environment. Furthermore, Eco School connects local activities with the global context through the integration of world environmental issues such as climate change, biodiversity and plastic pollution. This approach encourages children to see themselves as global citizens (*global citizens*) who have the responsibility and capacity to make a positive contribution. In the framework of 21st century education, the ability to think globally but act locally is an important dimension of visionary leadership (OECD, 2018).

In addition to fostering environmental consciousness, the Eco School program provides an experiential learning platform where students can take on active roles, plan actions, and make decisions—key aspects of leadership development (Henderson & Tilbury, 2004). By encouraging student-led initiatives such as waste management projects, energy audits, and environmental campaigns, the program allows children to engage in real-world problem-solving, thereby building self-confidence, accountability, and teamwork (Mogensen & Mayer, 2005). The program's seven-step framework, which includes forming an eco-committee and conducting environmental reviews, promotes collaboration and shared responsibility, enabling students to experience leadership through collective action and participatory governance (Eco-Schools, 2021). Through this process, students not only learn about sustainability but also cultivate critical leadership attributes such as decision-making, communication, and project management (Tilbury & Wortman, 2004). These structured opportunities for meaningful participation in school and community activities support the development of democratic values and civic engagement, both of which are essential components of leadership in a modern, interconnected society.

METHOD

The method used in writing this article is method systematic literature review (SLR). The SLR method is a method that aims to identify a study through various related literature sources that have the same discussion topic (Nightingale, 2009). The use of the SLR method is widely used for research that seeks answers to research questions through collecting published data or evidence (Lame, 2019). Writing using the SLR method is different from the literature review in general, because this method is aimed at identifying various articles that have specific

studies or topics (Nightingale, 2009). The collection of articles used to identify research topics was carried out based on the quality of the articles and also their suitability for the research objectives (Lame, 2019). The use of the SLR method can also help writers provide writing limits, make it easier to search for literature sources, make it easier to select literature sources, and draw conclusions from the results. review written because there is a specific topic of discussion.

The thing that needs to be considered when searching for literature sources is that the author needs to identify similarities in the issues discussed by the literature sources that will be used (Nightingale, 2009). The choice of literature sources can influence the information and amount of data obtained by the writer for writing needs. In determining which articles to use or which articles will not be used, researchers use the provisions of inclusion and exclusion criteria so that this approach can help the process of collecting the articles used (Lame, 2019).

RESULT

The Eco School Program, which is a global initiative from the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE), has become a strategic vehicle for building student leadership from an early age, especially at the junior high school level. From the results of reviewing various literature, it was found that this program was able to integrate leadership values through a participatory, educational and environment-based approach. One of the main aspects that emerges is the active role of students in various school activities which are not only related to environmental conservation, but also foster leadership skills such as communication, decision making, collaboration and project management (Eco-Schools, 2021). In this context, students are not only passive participants, but also initiators of activities that directly contribute to positive change in the school environment and community.

Participation in the Eco School program usually begins with the creation of a named organizational structure *eco-committee* consisting of students, teachers, school staff, and sometimes the community outside the school. The existence of this structure is one of the most effective strategies in training students to become collaborative and inclusive leaders. According to Barratt Hacking, Scott, and Lee (2010), this structure allows students to experience the leadership process directly through decision making, reporting activity results, as well as data-based program evaluation and planning. This reflects democratic learning and participatory governance. In research conducted by Cincera, Krajhanzl, and Salek (2018), it was found that student involvement in the Eco School program in the Czech Republic

significantly increased their self-confidence, initiative, presentation skills, and social empathy towards environmental and social issues.

Furthermore, Eco School has been proven to encourage the development of transformational leadership, namely leadership that is oriented towards long-term change and inspiration (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Students are invited to lead projects that not only have a direct impact on the environment, but also involve ethical and value dimensions. For example, students lead campaigns to reduce plastic waste, conduct school energy audits, or develop recycling-based school gardens. All these activities not only encourage environmental awareness, but also strengthen values such as responsibility, courage to make decisions, and the ability to convey ideas to the public. In this context, the Eco School program becomes an integrated learning space *cognitive skills* And *non-cognitive skills*, both of which are important components of leadership education (Tilbury & Wortman, 2004).

Aspects of learning through experience (*experiential learning*) is very dominant in the Eco School approach. This model is based on constructivism theory which states that effective learning occurs when students are actively involved in building knowledge through direct experience (Piaget, 1973). Processes such as observing the school environment, compiling activity reports, presenting ideas in front of friends and teachers, and reflecting on successes and failures are concrete leadership learning tools. Dweck (2006) states that involvement in this reflective process is also formative *growth mindset*, namely the mindset that abilities can continue to develop through effort and learning from mistakes. In the context of Eco School, students learn that failure in a project is not the end, but part of the process of self-development.

Findings from local studies in Indonesia also reinforce the important role of this program. Aziz and Adi (2021) in their research at SMPN 40 Surabaya found that the implementation of Eco School was able to improve students' abilities in managing activities, working together in teams, and expressing opinions openly in school forums. Leadership is no longer interpreted as a formal position or position, but rather as the ability to influence, take initiative, and be responsible for collective action. In addition, growing leadership is also characterized *servant leadership* (Greenleaf, 2002), namely leadership that is rooted in the desire to serve, not be served. Students are instilled with the values that being a leader means being able to provide benefits to other people and the surrounding environment.

Support from school principals and teachers is an important key in the successful implementation of Eco School as a means of forming leadership. Research by ResearchGate (2020) confirms that participatory and visionary principal leadership can create a learning environment that supports student initiative. When school principals and teachers provide

space, moral support and facilities for students to experiment and lead environmental projects, students will feel valued and encouraged to develop their potential. In this case, an open, collaborative and inclusive school culture is the main prerequisite for the development of student leadership. A school culture that respects diversity of opinion, encourages critical reflection, and recognizes student success will foster a psychological climate that is conducive to the leadership learning process.

Meanwhile, a study by Windawati and Trihantoyo (2017) highlighted the role of literacy culture in supporting the Eco School program at SMPN 23 Surabaya. The culture of reading and writing is developed in the context of environmental issues, so that students not only hone critical thinking and communication skills, but are also able to convey ideas and aspirations in the form of strong narratives. This is a form of communication-based leadership, which is very relevant in today's digital era. In addition, Sulaswari et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of integrating local wisdom in environmental education programs. Local values such as mutual cooperation, respect for nature, and simplicity can strengthen students' leadership identity as part of a community that has noble cultural values.

However, it cannot be ignored that there are a number of challenges in implementing Eco School as a medium for leadership formation. One of the main challenges is the lack of teacher training and capacity in facilitating activities that are truly participatory and encourage student leadership (Mogensen & Mayer, 2005). Many teachers are still trapped in conventional learning approaches that focus solely on knowledge transfer. Apart from that, the lack of support from the community outside the school and the government can also be an obstacle in implementing projects that require cross-sector collaboration. For this reason, synergy is needed between schools, parents, local governments and civil society organizations to create an educational ecosystem that truly encourages the birth of young leaders who care about the environment.

Finally, one of the Eco School's main strengths is its ability to connect local contexts with global issues. Through learning about climate change, the biodiversity crisis, and plastic pollution, students are invited to see themselves as world citizens who have global responsibilities (*global citizenship*) (UNESCO, 2017; OECD, 2018). This perspective strengthens the dimension of visionary leadership that not only thinks short-term, but also looks at the long-term impact of their actions on the planet and future generations. In this way, Eco School is not only a vehicle for environmental education, but also a strategic platform for producing young leaders with character, toughness and transformation.

DISUSSION

Leadership character is an important aspect related to human life. The emergence of leadership character comes from the process of human growth and development produced through social interaction (Blake & Mouton, 1985). Leadership itself is seen as the result of the influence of interpersonal human interaction which is directed in accordance with the direction of the goals to be achieved (Tannenbaum, Weschler, & Massarik 1961). This interpersonal interaction is demonstrated through actions carried out in a condition or situation that is to be achieved using communication activities (Tannenbaum, Weschler, & Massarik 1961).

Leadership as a human character that is formed from interaction has a function in human social life (Mumford, 1906). Character is defined as one of the most important factors in the development of behavior in a person to be able to determine actions or behavior that can be adjusted to one's own values and various situations (Djamaludin, 2021). The first function of having leadership character is that leadership is seen as one of the stages in the social process (Mumford, 1906). There is a role of leadership character in various forms of social processes, ranging from the most basic social processes to complex matters (Mumford, 1906). Another function of leadership is also used as a form of expression for interactions involving social interests (Mumford, 1906). Leadership is the most important character and also the most commonly needed in several social processes related to achievement, both group and individual (Mumford, 1906).

It is important to develop leadership character from a young age, especially in adolescence, because cognitively the development of the human brain will be fully mature when a person reaches adolescence (Djamaludin, 2021). Structural changes in the human brain in adolescence include various things such as emotional involvement, behavior, self-control, and the determination of values within oneself which along with maturity will continue to change during this transition period until entering the early adult phase (Papalia 2014). This is also related to how human cognitive development in adolescence is referred to as a period where humans develop abstract thoughts in the process of developing thinking (Piaget, 2010). Because of this process, it is important to instill positive values and carry out character development in teenagers. In this context, program Eco School has a significant contribution in forming and cultivating leadership character in students, especially in adolescence, through learning experiences that involve real social interaction, problem solving, and active participation in the school community. The instillation of leadership values through this program is in line with the stages of adolescent cognitive development which are characterized

by increased ability to think abstractly, reflectively and socially responsible (Papalia, 2014; Piaget, 2010).

Leadership character needs to be developed from an early age through various efforts, especially the formation of leadership character through social activities that involve interaction. There are three basic indicators and their derivatives formulated by Martinek, T., Schilling, T., and Hellison, D., to help see the involvement of a program in the development of leadership character in adolescents (Martinek, Schilling, & Hellison, 2006). The three indicators include: (1) Opportunities to Lead, (2) Preparing to Lead Others, and (3) Stages of Development.

In the Opportunities to Lead indicator, we see opportunities for teenagers to have the ability to lead. Opportunities to have leadership abilities are categorized into three, namely (1) Trial and Error, (2) People, and (3) Education. The Trial and Error category sees opportunities to learn through experimentation, or what is known as the concept of learning by doing. By trying various things, children will indirectly do something while learning by looking at figures they follow, such as teachers, parents and mentors. The People category is related to the previous category, this category looks at the role of other parties who contribute to efforts to develop leadership character. Other parties here can be exemplified as teachers, parents, coaches or mentors who provide guidance during the learning process as well as being role models in building leadership character. Meanwhile, the Education category is related to how education becomes a structured institution that is able to help foster leadership character in the community and school activities.

In the frame Opportunities to Lead as formulated by Martinek, Schilling, & Hellison (2006), Eco School provides an explorative space for students to lead real projects. For example, students are given responsibility for conducting school energy audits, designing plastic waste reduction programs, or leading water-saving campaigns. These activities allow students to learn directly through *trial and error*, namely they plan, implement, evaluate and learn from real results, both success and failure. In line with this, Blake & Mouton (1985) stated that effective leadership is the result of direct experience obtained through real actions and decision making in real situations. Apart from that, in the Eco School program the role of the teacher is very central as a facilitator who not only directs, but also provides space for students to develop ideas and implement them. Teachers who act as mentors are able to create a safe and supportive psychological environment, so that students feel valued and encouraged to take initiative (Barratt Hacking et al., 2010). The existence of positive role models strengthens social learning through the process of identifying and internalizing exemplary leadership

values. Eco School as part of the green curriculum or environmental education (PLH), is designed with a holistic approach that integrates theoretical learning and real practice in the school environment. This allows students to not only understand the concepts of sustainability and leadership, but also live them through hands-on activities. Cincera et al. (2018) confirmed that involvement in the Eco School program significantly boosted students' presentation skills, teamwork and confidence in voicing their aspirations.

Next is the Preparing to Lead Others indicator, which is the next stage after seeing opportunities for the ability to lead children. To prepare children for leadership, there are two dimensions that need to be considered based on this indicator, namely (1) Development & Implementation, and (2) Personal and Social Responsibility Model. The Development & Implementation dimension sees that there are platforms, activities and programs that can directly help develop and implement leadership abilities. This facility then becomes a forum that offers the opportunity to become a leader in a certain scope. In this dimension there are indicators of empowering and peer teaching which are mutually sustainable. Empowering sees the existence of forums or facilities that can be used to support the formation of leadership character, meanwhile Peer teaching utilizes existing forums as a development tool for mutual interaction and learning. This learning can be practiced directly by children together with the environment in the forum to share experiences and exchange ideas. Then, in the dimensions of the Personal and Social Responsibility Model, there are five basic goals that are needed in looking at efforts to develop leadership character: (1) Self-control and respect for the rights and feelings of others; (2) Trying one's best and teamwork; (3) Self-direction; (4) Caring for and helping others; and (5) Applying these goals outside the community.

Through the Eco School program, it can become a forum for students to develop and implement the leadership ideas they want to hone. Students are introduced to the leadership learning system through practice and then trained in aspects *self-control* and respecting the rights of others, especially when they have to resolve conflicts of interest in environmental projects they run. In the process, they are invited to work hard and collaborate (*trying one's best and teamwork*), have personal direction and goals (*self-direction*), caring about others (*caring for and helping others*), as well as being able to apply these values outside the school context (*applying goals outside the community*) (Hellison, 2011).

The third indicator is Stages of Development, which shows that after developing leadership character, at the transitional age, adolescents can also see development in terms of leadership character. There are four stages to help identify forms of leadership character development in adolescents, including Needs-based Leadership, Focusing on Planning and

Teaching, Reflective Leadership, and Compassionate Leadership. The Eco School program, through its values of sustainability, collaboration and social responsibility, creates space for leadership that is compassionate and oriented towards the collective good.

Therefore, it can be said that Eco School is a medium that has great potential in shaping the leadership character of teenagers. The program facilitates real leadership opportunities, encourages social preparation and training, and monitors and develops leadership through stages appropriate to the adolescent's psychological development. This kind of intervention is very important from a young age. The integration of the Eco School program in the curriculum and school culture is a strategic step in preparing the young generation as future leaders who have character, care and responsibility, especially towards the earth and each other.

CONCLUSION

The Eco School program is proven to have a strategic role in shaping the leadership of junior high school students through a holistic, participatory and sustainable environmental education approach. Based on the results of the literature review, Eco School not only focuses on changing environmentally friendly behavior, but also opens up space for active development of student character and leadership competencies. Students are directly involved in various planning, implementation and evaluation activities of school environmental programs, which encourages them to take responsibility, show initiative and solve problems collaboratively.

This article shows that Eco School creates contextual learning spaces that make students agents of change, not just recipients of knowledge. In this process, leadership values such as responsibility, empathy, cooperation, communication and decision making are formed naturally in real situations. Students not only learn from leadership theory, but also practice it through real actions such as environmental campaigns, waste management, energy conservation, and greening activities. The implementation of Eco School also has an impact on changing school culture to be more environmentally friendly and democratic. In this culture, leadership is no longer hierarchical, but spreads and can be practiced by every individual, including students. Schools that implement this program consistently tend to provide wider participation space for students, as well as strengthening collaboration between all elements of the school - teachers, principals, students and the community.

Furthermore, the reviewed literature shows that an integrative approach between environmental education and leadership development provides more optimal results. This emphasizes the importance of curriculum design and extracurricular activities that explicitly embed leadership values in the context of environmental action. This strategy is also in line

with the learning needs of the 21st century which demands critical thinking skills, collaborative leadership and social responsibility. However, Eco School's success in building student leadership is highly dependent on several supporting factors. These factors include school commitment, teacher training, community involvement, and policy support from stakeholders. Without this systemic support, the Eco School program has the potential to become just a symbolic activity without a real impact on student character and leadership.

In closing, this literature confirms that Eco School is able to be an effective forum in forming young leaders who are aware of social and environmental responsibility. By creating an educational ecosystem that supports active and reflective participation, Eco School is able to facilitate the growth of future leaders who have the vision, empathy and courage to act for the sustainability of this planet. Therefore, it is important for schools, policy makers and educational practitioners to consider Eco School as a model of character and leadership education that is relevant in this modern era.

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