

# Spiritual Leadership Practices Among Primary School Headmasters: Insights from Selected School Leaders in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the spiritual leadership approach practiced by primary school headmasters in Negeri Sembilan. This approach is gaining traction in the world of education because it emphasizes development in leaders such as values, ethics, and higher purpose in leadership. This study uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach, with data collected through in-depth interviews involving eleven experienced Headmasters from various types of primary schools in urban and rural areas. The study highlights elements of spiritual leadership such as faith and hope, knowledge and wisdom, vision and *al-falah*, as well as altruistic *rahmah* and love. This approach plays an important role in shaping a positive school culture, strengthening interpersonal relationships through effective communication, and fostering motivation and commitment among teachers, school staff, and the local community. In addition, the values of *ihsan* in spiritual leadership that school leaders need are, which involve traits such as sincerity, truthfulness, fairness, self-preservation, manners of communication, trust, and integrity, play a major role in this leadership practice. This study provides a deeper understanding of the role of spiritual leadership in the context of education in schools and provides guidance for school leaders to apply this approach in an effort to improve the quality of leadership. The spiritual element proved to be an important necessity that could help Headteachers strengthen leadership practices in schools. The implications of this study show that a spiritual leadership approach can be used as a basis for developing more holistic leadership training programmes and policies in the education sector in Malaysia and has a great opportunity to be emphasized. This approach aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and offers quality of education in primary school.

**Keywords:** Spiritual leadership, school leaders, headmasters, Malaysia.

## INTRODUCTION

The study of leadership has garnered increasing scholarly attention, driven by the need to identify and understand leadership models that are both effective and contextually relevant. As organizations and societies continue to evolve, the demand for leadership frameworks that emphasize ethical decision-making, and moral integrity has become more pronounced. In this research context, spiritual leadership emerges as a critical paradigm, grounded in core spiritual values such as integrity, justice, humility, and ethical conduct (Samul, 2009). These values serve as a catalyst in shaping leaders who not only demonstrate strong moral character but also inspire ethical behavior within their organizations and communities. The presence of well-developed spiritual values enhances leadership effectiveness, fostering a culture of integrity and collective responsibility. Spiritual leadership extends beyond individual leadership capabilities, influencing organizational cohesion and societal well-being. Given its profound impact, a deeper exploration of spiritual leadership is essential to understand how it shapes leadership practices and contributes to sustainable, values-driven leadership in various contexts.

Spiritual leadership is increasingly recognized as a transformative leadership model that integrates values, purpose, and ethical principles into organizational management (Fry, 2003). Rooted in intrinsic motivation and

personal integrity, spiritual leadership aims to inspire and sustain individuals by fostering a shared vision, instilling hope, and cultivating a culture of altruistic love (Samul, 2019; Siraj *et al.*, 2023). In educational settings, spiritual leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping school culture, enhancing teacher commitment, and influencing student development (Reave, 2005). Globally, research has demonstrated that spiritual leadership contributes to increased organizational well-being, ethical decision-making, and sustainable leadership practices (Mohd Ariffin *et al.*, 2024), particularly in faith-based and values-driven institutions (Espedal, 2019). However, despite its recognized benefits, the application of spiritual leadership within school environments remains underexplored, particularly in non-Western educational contexts (Nor, 2022).

Effective school management and leadership are critical in ensuring the success of educational institutions by fostering a supportive, ethical, and goal-oriented school environment (Bush & Glover, 2021). Traditional leadership models in education, such as transformational leadership, instructional leadership, and distributed leadership, emphasize organizational goals, performance, and efficiency (Hallinger, 2011; Rumeli *et al.*, 2022). However, spiritual leadership offers an alternative paradigm by integrating moral and ethical dimensions into decision-making, ensuring that leadership goes beyond administrative functions to nurture holistic well-being among students, teachers, and school staff (Aithal & Ramanathan, 2024). In this regard, spiritual leadership aligns with educational leadership frameworks that emphasize values-based decision-making, emotional intelligence, and ethical responsibility (Day & Sammons, 2016). While research on school leadership in Malaysia has largely focused on instructional and transformational leadership, there remains a significant gap in understanding how spiritual leadership influences school management and leadership practices.

In Malaysia, the role of spiritual leadership is deeply embedded in the National Education Philosophy, which emphasizes holistic human development across physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and social dimensions (Abd Hamid & Alam, 2022). The Malaysian education system, particularly in national schools with a Muslim-majority student population, places significant importance on leadership guided by Islamic values, such as faith, knowledge, justice, mercy, humility, and communal well-being (Al Naqbi, 2024). These principles are integral to fostering an educational environment that not only prioritizes academic excellence but also nurtures ethical and responsible individuals. However, there remains a gap in empirical research on how spiritual leadership is enacted in schools and its impact on teacher effectiveness, student engagement, and school culture (Li *et al.*, 2024). While Islamic educational philosophy emphasizes the importance of developing students holistically, limited studies have examined how headmasters incorporate spiritual leadership principles into daily school administration and decision-making.

Furthermore, the increasing challenges in educational leadership, such as teacher burnout, declining student motivation, and the need for strong moral leadership, highlight the relevance of spiritual leadership in addressing these issues (Budur, 2024). The Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity (VUCA) world further exposed vulnerabilities in school leadership, with many educators struggling to maintain a sense of purpose and motivation amidst disruptions (Reis, 2024). These challenges reinforce the need for leadership approaches that emphasize emotional intelligence, ethical responsibility, and the ability to inspire a shared sense of purpose all of which are central to spiritual leadership (Rami *et al.*, 2025).

This study aims to explore how spiritual leadership practices among primary school headmasters in Negeri Sembilan shape school culture, enhance teacher effectiveness, and support student growth. By examining leadership practices through an Islamic lens, this research seeks to provide insights into how values-driven leadership fosters a positive and inclusive educational environment. The findings will contribute to the growing discourse on values-based leadership in education, offering practical implications for leadership training, policy development, and educational management in Malaysia and beyond.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The concept of Islamic-based spiritual leadership in schools

Islamic spiritual leadership in educational institutions, especially in schools, can significantly improve students' academic achievement, ethical growth and social welfare. Recent studies in Malaysia show that this leadership approach can improve academic performance and the development of moral and ethical values among students

(Abdul Kadir & Kutty, 2023). A study conducted by Syahid *et al.*, (2024) shows that spiritual leadership in schools that uphold Islamic values, including trust, justice, and compassion can increase teachers' motivation and commitment. Leadership that is spiritually inclined will be able to increase a person's ability to control negative behaviors and be able to solve problems based on Islamic spiritual values (Qushwa *et al.*, 2024) which leads to *the direction of 'al falah'*, which is success in doing '*makruf*' (kindness) and abandoning '*unlawful*' things (crime). Thoughtful and caring school leaders are more likely to cultivate passionate and dedicated educators.

Spiritual leadership in schools also greatly influences students' moral development and identity formation. (Sudrajat & Sufiyana, 2020) found that school leaders who prioritize leadership rooted in Islamic principles can help students understand Islamic moral and ethical values. They will exhibit a heightened sensitivity to social and humanitarian concerns, allowing them to act with greater responsibility and moral and ethical considerations in their daily lives (Samiran, 2024). Spiritual leadership is seen to be able to influence the positive value of the school environment (Masnawati & Hariani, 2023). Jahroni *et al.*, (2024) in his study emphasized that spiritual leadership, especially when rooted in Islamic values, positively influences performance and job satisfaction across various educational institutions including schools. Leaders who prioritize the spiritual and moral development of students can foster a more harmonious and competitive atmosphere in the education sector, especially schools.

A study conducted by Said *et al.*, (2024) shows that school leaders who practice Islamic-based leadership foster a harmonious and collaborative learning environment. Students in a harmonious environment of academic and spiritual dimensions exhibit a greater passion for learning and a strong commitment to their education. Avolio *et al.*, (2022) explained that spiritual leadership, which incorporates religious values such as Islam, can improve the quality of education and social welfare in schools. Leaders who emphasize spiritual values in education administration can foster a more inclusive and competitive environment in academics (Arar *et al.*, 2023).

### Concept of Spiritual Leadership

Fry (2003) conceptualizes spiritual leadership as a values-driven approach that fosters a sense of meaning and belonging among followers. In educational settings, particularly Islamic institutions, spiritual leadership aligns with the fundamental goals of Islamic education, which aim to cultivate well-rounded individuals by integrating spiritual, moral, and intellectual dimensions (Musah, 2024). Fry (2003) also argues that spiritual leadership enhances intrinsic motivation by providing individuals with a sense of calling and purpose, which is crucial in school leadership.

In the Islamic values, spiritual leadership prioritizes moral and ethical principles based on religious teachings. It emphasizes justice, trust, compassion, moderation, and responsibility while maintaining positive relationships with God and others (Zakaria, 2019). Leaders are seen not merely as managers but as role models who embody integrity, wisdom, and sincerity. The objective of spiritual leadership in Islam is to positively influence followers, fostering moral and ethical values that ensure spiritual, social, and material well-being (Makhbul *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, leadership is not solely focused on material success but also on cultivating a harmonious relationship between leaders and followers based on Islamic principles.

In national schools, spiritual leadership plays a significant role as it reflects Islamic values and teachings. Ali (2023) highlight that Islamic leadership emphasizes justice, compassion, and community welfare, which are essential for fostering an educational environment where students thrive academically, ethically, and spiritually. Mustari (2022) and Wang *et al.*, (2019) assert that integrating these values into school leadership enhances the sense of purpose among students and educators, motivating collective efforts toward shared goals. Research by Reave (2005) and Khaddam *et al.*, (2023) further supports this view, showing that schools led by headmasters who incorporate Islamic principles exhibit higher levels of teacher satisfaction and student engagement. Their findings suggest that spiritual leadership strengthens school culture and contributes to academic success and personal development.

Study by Ruhullah & Ushama (2025) reflect the role of ethical and spiritual development in Islamic education, demonstrating that leadership rooted in Islamic values fosters ethical behavior, respect, and inclusivity. This environment not only supports academic achievement but also cultivates responsible and ethical citizenship.

Similarly, Amat *et al.*, (2023) argue that spiritual leadership nurtures a school culture of honesty, empathy, and collaboration, improving student behavior and teacher-student relationships. However, Oh & Wang (2020) identifies a gap in empirical research regarding the practical implementation of spiritual leadership in Islamic education, as most studies remain theoretical. Arar *et al.*, (2023) emphasize the need for further research to explore its impact on teacher motivation, student behavior, and institutional performance.

Implementing spiritual leadership in Islamic schools also presents challenges, particularly in multicultural societies like Malaysia. Karim *et al.*, (2022) stress the importance of school leaders navigating varying levels of religious commitment among students, staff, and the wider community. A flexible approach that respects diverse perspectives while maintaining the core principles of Islamic education is crucial. Furthermore, community and parental involvement play a vital role in reinforcing spiritual leadership. Fry (2023) highlight that collaboration among school leaders, educators, parents, and the local community strengthens the effectiveness of spiritual leadership. A cohesive community environment ensures that students receive consistent messages about the importance of spiritual and ethical development both at home and in school.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework is a structure that underpins research by offering direction derived from pertinent theories and concepts. This theoretical framework will guide the focus of the study on spiritual leadership in schools and serve as a foundation for data analysis. Spiritual leadership in educational institutions entails the application of moral and ethical principles in the administration and governance of schools, grounded in religious doctrines, particularly those of Islam.

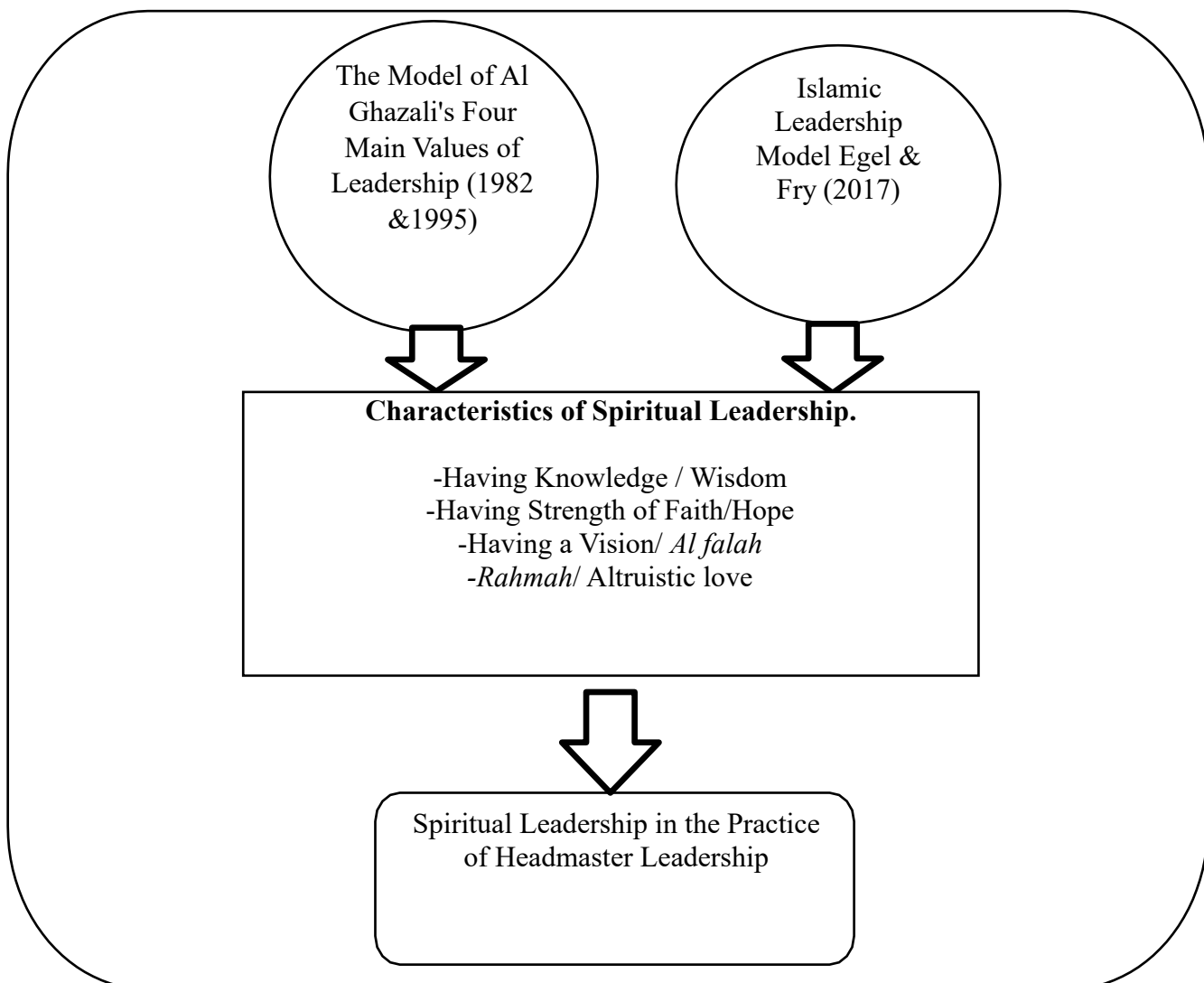


Figure 1: Framework of Spiritual Leadership in School Context

Within the scope of learning, spiritual leadership in schools is significant because it cultivates a desirable culture and ethics among the school members (Mulang & Putra, 2023). The construction of spiritual leadership theory resting on Al Ghazali and Egel & Fry model offers an in-depth analysis on the spiritual underpinning and ethical values that must be provided to assist researcher in their duties (Ceyhan & Barca, 2021). The Al Ghazali model views leadership as a trust and whose performance should be deeply rooted in Islamic ethics. He noted that a leader must be knowledgeable or wise, just, courageous, and possess high ethical standards in self-preservation and self-accountability while being an ethical role model. In this perspective, leadership will not be concerned with scholarly achievement alone. It will lay emphasis on the development of character and moral values among teachers and learners. On the other hand, the Egel & Fry model takes a more modern stance by incorporating spirituality into leadership. In their view, spiritual leadership also appreciates qualities like vision, hope, and altruistic love, as well as the credentialed ability to motivate people (Egel & Fry, 2017). This perspective encourages Headmasters to create an emotionally and spiritually supportive environment for the holistic development of students. Both develop frameworks designed for enabling teachers to implement these very principles in their daily practices and teaching. The importance of these guides' principles should not be overlooked when it comes to leading other headmaster's in school. With these values, they can foster responsible learning and personal development that goes beyond academic success and focuses on character building among learners. (Azzuhri et. al. 2024) The primary reasons, which include knowledge, faith, hope, vision, love, and inspiration altruistically put forth do change the achievement gap but also alter the policies of the school.

## FINDINGS

This analysis seeks to understand how the headmaster's spiritual leadership is influenced by the central values advanced by Al Ghazali and Egel & Fry. When Headmasters value these aspects, they are able to cultivate an identity that not only addresses the problems but also works towards the nurturing of an individual within a school. Therefore, this analysis will demonstrate that the application of this theoretical framework in spiritual leadership is an important aspect that helps not only the effectiveness and school management but also for every school community in appreciating what it means to have spiritual leadership in a school. The analysis was conducted based on two models that have had considerable influence. These models are the Al Ghazali Four Key Values of Leadership model (1982 & 1995) and the Egel & Fry Islamic Leadership Model (2017). This framework presents four constitutive values of a leader which are 'having knowledge and wisdom, having faith and hope', 'having vision', and 'al falah and rahmah' (altruistic love). Each value serves as a pillar to build teachers' attitudes and behaviors in school management and in so doing, indirectly influences the social climate of the educational setting positively.

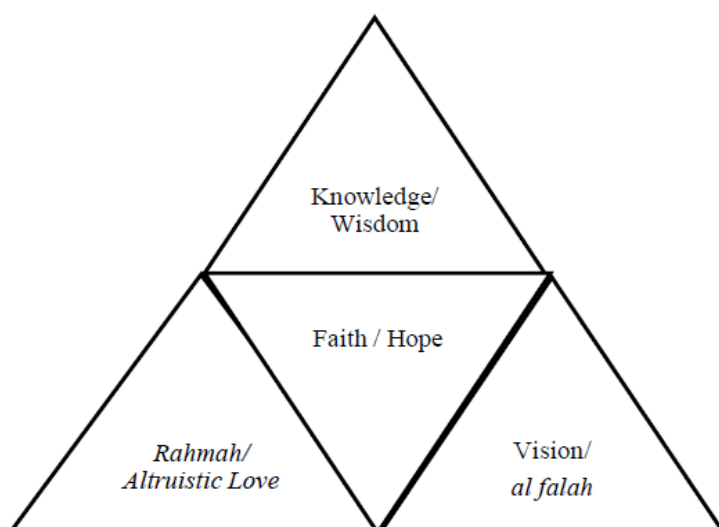


Figure 2: Four main values of Islamic leadership

Source: Authors Illustration

**Have Knowledge and Wisdom:** Having good knowledge is an important element in forming leadership. The formation of solid knowledge and wisdom seeks to be a catalyst for the process of forming a memorable



leadership style, especially spiritual leadership (Jasmansyah *et al.*, 2024). Mastery of science or wisdom has the potential to contribute towards the formation of a good spiritual leadership style. The wisdom of a professor is interrelated with the excellence of an organization, especially a school. This is because the professor is the main leader of the school organization. Headmasters need to have strategic thinking and be able to come up with ideas in making changes systematically in schools to ensure that spiritual values can be practiced in schools (Ghazali *et al.*, 2022). School planning in designing activities and programs to build spiritual values in teachers and students can enable school staff to cultivate good spiritual values in line with religious demands, namely practicing good and leaving bad. There is no doubt that as a leader, one will always be faced with various behaviors and the people you lead who need wisdom to deal with them, including among teachers and staff, students and the local community. Various problems that arise can be overcome in the best way if the leader has various intelligence knowledge such as social, emotional, cognitive, language through effective communication.

**Have the Strength of Faith - Hope:** Possess the strength of faith and hope. Headmasters with a commendable strength of faith demonstrates a deep commitment to fulfilling the trust that has been given to them. A headmaster who manifests the strength of faith is also able to achieve great success not only in academic work but also as a planner in developing and cultivating desirable character (Subhaktiyasa *et al.*, 2023). Trust will automatically generate hope of receiving bounties from Allah and that hope will be accompanied by a leader getting closer to religion in whom he has faith that Allah is there, and renders help in assuring one's peace and welfare of life. A leader that possesses strong faith will not only consider this wish as attainable but also enduring negation of forbidden activities in religion (Hassan & Ibrahim, 2022).

**A Vision - Al falah:** An important task in the leadership aspect of a Headmaster is to be an efficient leader who can create and achieve a clear vision related to the direction and achievement of an organization's goals. According to Rumeli & Md. Rami (2023), a good leader needs to have a clear vision to create success (Al falah) as set (Rumeli & Md. Rami, 2023).

**Altruistic love - Rahmah:** Altruistic love is a behavior that cares or cares about what happens among subordinates and prioritizes their welfare (Mulinge, 2018). This has the same meaning as *rahmah*, which is the value of love which is the main value in Islamic leadership (Sharip *et al.*, 2023). A leader who has a high value of compassion does not only view his duties and responsibilities from the aspect of duties alone but also sees it as a trust to help, understand and motivate his subordinates. This trait of rahmah will establish a closer relationship between leaders and employees, which in turn makes employees feel very comfortable and work hard to ensure that the organization can achieve its objectives or goals (Mulinge, 2018).

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the integration of four core values knowledge and wisdom, strength of faith and hope, vision (*al-falah*), and altruistic love (*rahmah*) plays a crucial role in shaping a leadership model that fosters both spiritual and cultural development within schools. When effectively applied by headmasters, these values not only enhance social relationships but also cultivate a learning environment grounded in ethical principles, mutual respect, and intellectual growth. This, in turn, fosters teacher well-being and student success by embedding moral and spiritual dimensions into the fabric of school leadership. The synthesis of Al-Ghazali's classical perspectives and the contemporary spiritual leadership model by Egel & Fry (2003) explained that leadership rooted in spiritual values serves as a catalyst for strengthening character formation among students while also improving school management practices. The practical application of these principles ensures that leadership extends beyond administrative functions to focus on shaping a school culture characterized by trust, empathy, and a shared sense of purpose.

### The Core Values in School Leadership Practices

**Knowledge and Wisdom:** A leader's ability to make sound, ethical decisions is strengthened by the possession of wisdom and knowledge. Headmasters who demonstrate intellectual depth and a balanced judgment cultivate a high level of trust among teachers and students. Their ability to provide well-informed guidance fosters a school climate where continuous learning and ethical conduct are emphasized.

**Strength of Faith and Hope:** Faith-based leadership provides a source of resilience and motivation within the school community. When headmasters exemplify strong faith, they inspire confidence among students and teachers, encouraging them to persevere through challenges with optimism. This aligns with the belief that success in both worldly and spiritual pursuits is interconnected, reinforcing a sense of purpose in academic and personal growth.

**Vision (Al-Falah):** Effective spiritual leadership is driven by a clear and well-articulated vision that aligns with the holistic development of students and educators. A headmaster who upholds a vision rooted in Islamic teachings fosters a school environment that prioritizes ethical decision-making, long-term goal setting, and the pursuit of success in both worldly and spiritual contexts. A strong vision provides direction, ensuring that every initiative within the school is aligned with the broader objective of nurturing responsible and ethical individuals.

**Altruistic Love (Rahmah):** The presence of *rahmah* in leadership promotes a culture of care, empathy, and respect. A leader who embodies compassion fosters positive relationships between teachers and students, creating an environment where learning is not only about acquiring knowledge but also about developing emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills. The mutual respect between educators and learners strengthens the overall learning experience, making it more meaningful and impactful.

### Implication for School Leadership

The integration of these values into leadership practices has far-reaching implications for school management effectiveness. A headmaster who embodies spiritual leadership principles can foster an inclusive school culture, enhance collaboration among educators, and increase student motivation. More than just fulfilling administrative functions, such leaders inspire a collective commitment to ethical conduct, personal growth, and academic excellence. Furthermore, to ensure the effective implementation of spiritual leadership in schools, structured professional development programs must be introduced. These programs should encompass a range of initiatives aimed at equipping headmasters with the necessary skills and insights to lead with integrity and moral responsibility.

One crucial component is training modules on ethics and spiritual leadership, which provide a strong foundation in ethical decision-making and leadership practices rooted in spiritual values. Additionally, mentorship and guidance from experienced leaders play a vital role in bridging the gap between theory and practice, as seasoned leaders can offer real-world insights and practical strategies for integrating spiritual leadership into daily school management. Furthermore, the consistent application of spiritual leadership values is essential for long-term success, requiring continuous reinforcement through institutional policies, ongoing leadership training, and active engagement with school communities. By implementing these structured approaches, schools can foster a leadership culture that prioritizes both academic excellence and the holistic development of students and educators.

The findings highlight that spiritual leadership, when effectively applied, extends beyond administrative responsibilities to become a transformative force within schools. By embedding knowledge, faith, vision, and compassion into leadership practices, headmasters can create a school environment that not only achieves academic success but also nurtures the moral and spiritual growth of students. Moving forward, institutionalizing these values through targeted training and mentorship programs will be crucial in ensuring that spiritual leadership remains a fundamental aspect of school leadership, fostering long-term educational excellence and ethical development.

### CONCLUSION

Existing research highlights that spiritual leadership, grounded in Islamic values, plays a significant role in fostering holistic development within Islamic educational institutions. This leadership approach has been shown to enhance school culture, increase teacher satisfaction, and strengthen student engagement and moral development. However, further empirical research is required to examine the practical implementation of spiritual leadership and the challenges school leaders face in integrating Islamic values into their leadership practices. Understanding these challenges and identifying effective strategies to address them will be crucial in

maximizing the benefits of spiritual leadership in Islamic educational settings. In the context of Malaysian schools, Islamic spiritual leadership is essential for cultivating an ethical school culture, enhancing motivation, and reinforcing students' moral and character development. Recent studies suggest that this leadership model contributes positively to both the learning environment and students' academic performance. By embracing core values such as trust, justice, compassion, and moderation, school leaders can foster a more cohesive and dynamic educational environment. This, in turn, supports not only academic excellence but also the spiritual and ethical growth of students, ensuring a more balanced and meaningful educational experience.

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