

Holistic Leadership in Elementary Character Education: Modelling, Habituation, and Integration in a Challenging Context

Inke Safitri¹, Meilia Rosani¹, Mahasir¹

¹Universitas PGRI Palembang, South Sumatra, Indonesia

Corresponding author e-mail: inkesafitri9@gmail.com

Article History: Received on 26 December 2025, Revised on 23 March 2026,
Published on 1 April 2026

Abstract: This study examines the implementation of holistic leadership in strengthening character education amidst the challenges of the digital era at SDN 17 Tungkal Ilir, Indonesia. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observations, and documentation analysis involving the principal, teachers, and community stakeholders. The findings reveal a three-tier strategic framework: first, the principal serves as the primary role model through a consistent “5S” culture (Greet, Smile, Salutation, Politeness, Courtesy), creating a ripple effect of integrity; second, character values are internalized through structured routines, including the “7 Habits of Happy Kids” program, daily reflection journals, and Scouting as a character laboratory for discipline and independence; third, the school establishes a “School Fortress” (*Benteng Sekolah*) by integrating formal partnerships with the Police and parents to mitigate external negative influences such as online gambling and gadget addiction. The study concludes that holistic leadership, which synchronizes exemplary behavior, consistent habituation, and cross-sectoral collaboration, effectively fortifies student character even within resource-constrained and technologically challenging environments. The novelty lies in the integrated framework combining role modeling, structured routines, and external partnerships as a unified response to digital-era moral risks. Practically, this model offers a replicable strategy for schools facing similar challenges. The study contributes to educational leadership literature by demonstrating how holistic leadership can transcend conventional teaching to address structural constraints and moral degradation risks in contemporary schooling contexts.

Keywords: Adaptive Leadership, Character Education, Holistic Leadership

A. Introduction

Character education in the current era of digital disruption holds crucial urgency. The challenges of globalization and the massive influx of information demand not only academic intelligence but also moral resilience, integrity, and social responsibility as the core foundations for the younger generation. However, educational practices are frequently trapped in a dichotomy, where academic (cognitive) learning is isolated from character formation. A holistic approach is required to bridge this gap by

integrating academic learning with students' character building, ensuring that learners do not only excel cognitively but also mature in their emotional and social skills (Yuliana dkk., 2020). Furthermore, the implementation of a character-based holistic education model is essential for effectively instilling fundamental values such as religious values and moral conduct from an early age (Pitriyanita, 2022). Thus, holistic character education is no longer merely an option; it is an urgent necessity to ensure that the younger generation can grow in a complete and balanced manner while navigating the complexities of the modern era.

The urgency of strengthening character is not merely a response to contemporary challenges but is a constitutional mandate and a national regulatory requirement. The primary juridical foundation of education in Indonesia, namely (Sistem Pendidikan Nasional, 2003), concerning the National Education System, explicitly states that the goal of national education is "to develop the potential of students to become individuals who have faith and piety toward God the Almighty, possess noble character, are healthy, knowledgeable, capable, creative, independent, and become democratic and responsible citizens." This emphasis on "noble character" was further strengthened and operationalized through Presidential Regulation No. 87 of 2017 concerning the Strengthening of Character Education (PPK). This regulation affirms the government's commitment to making character education the main axis of educational implementation, integrated through the harmonization of ethics, aesthetics, literacy, and kinesthetics. Thus, these two regulations provide a solid legal framework and strategic direction, asserting that character education is not an elective or additional program, but rather the heart of the educational process in every educational unit.

Despite a strong regulatory foundation, a significant disparity remains between policy idealism and the reality of implementation on the ground. In practice, many schools are still trapped in partial and superficial approaches, where the meaning of character education is reduced to a mere transfer of cognitive knowledge within the classroom. This practice fails as it ignores the development of the whole person. Effective implementation demands a holistic approach that focuses not only on "internal strategies" (classroom learning) but also on "external strategies" involving the active participation of families and the community (Dwi & Mukhamad Murdiono, 2020). The failure to adopt this holistic approach is often rooted in leadership factors. In fact, school leadership is a critical determinant in fostering a holistic educational environment; a leader must be capable of instilling values and practicing "leading by example" to build a character-driven school culture (Ansori et al., 2024). When leadership fails to be holistic and focuses solely on instructional aspects, the regulatory mandate to form well-rounded character will remain unfulfilled.

To address the failure of the partial approach, the concept of "Holistic Leadership" emerges as a theoretical solution that views the school as a unified ecosystem, where character is not merely taught but lived and cultivated by all elements. This holistic

leadership is not abstract; rather, it is practically manifested through three interconnected strategic pillars. Various studies have identified that the effective implementation of character education in elementary schools relies heavily on (1) Modeling (the leader's role as a role model), (2) Habituation (creating positive routines), and (3) Value Integration [within the curriculum/school activities]. Specifically, modeling and habituation have proven to be fundamental methods in instilling values and shaping student behavior (Wahyudi et al., 2023).

Theoretically, effective character education cannot be achieved through fragmented interventions; instead, it demands a comprehensive or holistic approach. Character education theory (such as that proposed by Lickona) emphasizes the importance of three interrelated components: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. To fully cultivate these three aspects, the principal's leadership role becomes central in implementing appropriate strategies. Practically, two key methods proven to be effective are habituation and modeling, where the daily behaviors of leaders and teachers serve as direct examples for students to emulate (Saifullah et al., 2024). In addition to cultivation through modeling and habits, a holistic approach also requires the integration of character education into the classroom learning process. This ensures that values are not taught in isolation but are merged with academic material to develop a generation that possesses both intelligence and integrity (Nur Khasanah & Ima Rosila, 2025). Thus, a holistic leadership strategy is a leader's conscious effort to align the entire school ecosystem combining habituation (culture), modeling (exemplars), and integration (curriculum) to consistently "animate" character values.

The environmental conditions surrounding SDN 17 Tungkal Ilir still uphold the tradition of *gotong royong* (communal cooperation) within community activities. Residents in the rural areas are characterized by their politeness and hospitality. However, alongside technological advancements, the development of the younger generation has recently required serious attention due to the prevalence of online gambling, which has led to widespread despair and even cases of suicide in the region. Furthermore, cases of parental divorce have exerted a significant impact on students, ranging from depression to behavioral shifts and a marked decline in learning motivation. Other challenges include early marriage, a high number of students failing to pursue higher education, and a decline in moral standards evidenced by the use of inappropriate language. These findings clearly demonstrate the urgency of profound improvements, particularly in optimizing character cultivation at SDN 17 Tungkal Ilir. An environment that should ideally serve as a sanctuary for noble values is now confronted with complex social realities. Therefore, a robust and sustainable character education program is essential to strengthen the moral and mental resilience of students.

B. Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with a single-case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of holistic leadership strategies in character education. The research was conducted at SDN 17 Tungkal Ilir, Banyuasin, from June to November 2025. This site was purposively selected as it represents a rural educational profile facing complex social challenges, such as the impact of digital disruption and local social crises. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique to ensure data richness from key actors in the school ecosystem. The informants included: (1) the School Principal as the primary decision-maker; (2) the School Supervisor for policy perspectives; (3) teachers as frontline implementers; (4) the School Committee; and (5) students and parents for data triangulation regarding behavioral changes. Data were gathered through three synchronized techniques to ensure technical triangulation:

1. Data collection was primarily conducted through in-depth, semi-structured interviews designed to explore the strategic dimensions of character education, specifically focusing on planning, modeling, habituation, and external partnership strategies. This flexible interview format allowed the researchers to probe deeply into the principal's decision-making process, the teachers' pedagogical integration, and the parents' perceptions of behavioral changes, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the holistic leadership model. By utilizing an interview guide that prioritized open-ended questions, the study captured nuanced qualitative insights into how abstract moral values are operationalized into daily school routines and strategic alliances within a rural educational context.
2. Data collection was further strengthened through non-participant observation, conducted to verify the daily implementation of the "5S" culture (*Senyum, Sapa, Salam, Sopan, Santun*), religious routines, and spontaneous student interactions within the school environment. This observational approach served as a vital cross-check for the claims made during interviews, allowing the researchers to witness firsthand the consistency between formal policy and actual behavioral practice. By maintaining a non-intrusive presence, the researchers were able to capture authentic data on how character values are manifested in real-time, thereby ensuring the empirical validity of the holistic leadership model implemented at SDN 17 Tungkal Ilir.
3. The data collection process was completed through a systematic documentation study, which involved a detailed analysis of formal school records to corroborate the findings from interviews and observations. Key documents examined included the School Activity Plans (RKAS) to identify budgetary and strategic priorities for character building, teacher lesson plans (RPP) to evaluate the explicit integration of moral values within academic subjects, and the student daily journals from the "7 Habits of Great Children" program. By reviewing these archival materials, the researchers were able to trace the consistency of

character education from high-level institutional planning down to individual student progress, providing a solid evidentiary basis for the study's conclusions.

The data were analyzed using the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). The process involved: (1) Data Condensation, selecting and coding field notes related to holistic leadership pillars; (2) Data Display, organizing categorized data into narrative matrices for easier pattern recognition; and (3) Conclusion Drawing/Verification, where initial findings were continuously tested against the evidence through source and method triangulation to ensure objectivity (Mansur & Sholeh, 2024). To collect the data, three primary instruments were utilized:

1. In-depth Interviews (Structured and Semi-structured): These were conducted to explore leadership strategies. The informants in this study included various parties with pivotal roles in the school's educational ecosystem:
 - a. School Supervisor: Providing perspectives on character education policies and their evaluation.
 - b. Principal: As the primary decision-maker and official responsible for school management.
 - c. Teachers: As the direct implementers of character education within the learning process.
 - d. School Committee: Representing the community's voice and supporting school activities outside the formal structure.
 - e. Parents/Guardians: Providing insights into changes in student behavior and family involvement in supporting character building.
2. Non-participant Observation: To directly observe the practices of "modelling" and "habituation" within the school environment.
3. Documentation Study: To analyse teachers' lesson plans (RPP) (regarding character "integration") and school code of conduct documents.

The data analysis technique was adapted from the Miles and Huberman model in Sugiyono (2019), which involves data collection, data reduction, and drawing conclusions (Saadah et al., 2022). Specifically, the data was analyzed using the interactive analysis model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of three concurrent flows:

1. Data Condensation: (reduction and coding of interview/observation data).
2. Data Display: In the form of matrices and narrative descriptions.
3. Conclusion Drawing and Verification: Strengthened by source triangulation techniques.

C. Results and Discussion

The implementation of character education at SDN 17 Tungkal Ilir demonstrates a systematic and integrated approach through various leadership strategies and adaptive school programs. Research findings reveal that the strengthening of student character is carried out through four main pillars: the principal's modeling in daily

behavior, measurable routine habituation, the integration of moral values into the core curriculum, and the development of external partnerships through the "School Fortress" (*Benteng Sekolah*) program. These strategies are designed to ensure that values such as discipline, honesty, and nationalism are not only understood cognitively but are also internalized into concrete living behaviors for the entire school community.

1. Principal's Modeling and Leadership Behaviors

The findings at SDN 17 Tungkal Ilir indicate that the principal's modelling serves as the foundational pillar of the school's character education ecosystem. Mrs. SS., consistently demonstrates a "lead by example" approach that permeates daily school operations. Observations reveal that the principal is the first person to arrive at the school gate, usually by 06:45 AM, to personally greet students as they enter. This practice, known locally as the 5S culture (*Senyum, Sapa, Salam, Sopan, Santun*), is not merely a written rule but a lived behavior. This is in line with the research by (Suciati et al., 2023), which asserts that authentic modeling is the most effective instrument in students' moral development compared to mere theoretical instruction. Furthermore, according to (Mutohar et al., 2021), principal leadership behavior and teacher modeling significantly influence the formation of student character, as a strong and religious school culture created by such leadership acts as a catalyst for students to adapt positively to their environment. By standing at the gate, the principal models punctuality and hospitality, which the students then mirror in their interactions with teachers and peers.

In terms of leadership behavior, the principal adopts a "walk-the-talk" strategy. During the Monday morning flag ceremonies, she does not only deliver speeches about discipline but actively participates in every ritual, ensuring her own attire and posture meet the school's standards. Furthermore, in religious activities, the principal is observed joining the students in the Dhuha prayer and communal Quranic recitations. This direct involvement signals to the school community that character values are not tasks to be delegated but shared responsibilities.

The principal's leadership style is also characterized by high visibility and accessibility. She frequently conducts "classroom walkthroughs" not to find faults in teaching, but to interact with students and reinforce positive behavior on the spot. When a student demonstrates integrity, such as returning a lost item the principal provides immediate public verbal recognition. In administrative meetings, she emphasizes that every teacher is a "character envoy," reminding staff that their private and public conduct is a curriculum in itself. This behavior ensures that the leadership's moral compass is visible to all stakeholders, creating a standard of conduct that is consistently maintained across the institution.

2. Habituation Practice in the School

Habituation practices at SDN 17 Tungkal Ilir begin with the welcoming of students through the consistent application of the 5S culture Smile, Greet, Salute, Polite, and Courteous carried out by teachers at the school gate. Routine religious activities serve as the core of daily habituation, where students perform collective prayers before and after learning. On Fridays, this routine is expanded through mosque cleaning as a social activity to clean the school environment and the nearest mosque, aiming to instill religious values and environmental awareness in a sustainable manner.

Character cultivation grounded in school culture serves as a strategic intervention that shapes student behavior by fostering a conducive and value-laden institutional climate (Suardin et al., 2023). This is consistent with the findings of (Yusnan, 2022) who asserts that effective character education in elementary schools is implemented through strategies of constant habituation and reminders of virtuous values. Furthermore, Lickona (2013) states that good character must encompass the aspects of *moral knowing*, *moral feeling*, and *moral action*. Through concrete activities such as mosque cleaning, students are not only taught but also shown that programmed routine habituation is the most effective method for transferring values of discipline and responsibility to elementary-aged children due to its repetitive and concrete nature. Thus, it can be understood that utilizing routine activities as a means of habituation aims to internalize noble character values into the daily behavior of students within the elementary school environment (Handoko et al., 2024).

Character habituation is systematically reinforced through the “7 Habits of Great Children” (*7 Kebiasaan Anak Hebat*) program, which is documented in the students’ daily journals. Through this instrument, students independently record various positive activities such as discipline in waking up early, independence in worship, and responsibility for cleanliness, while being encouraged to perform direct moral actions. Students are given the responsibility to assist their parents at home, which is then verified and monitored periodically by the class teacher. In addition, nationalism values are instilled daily through the habit of singing the national anthem, *Indonesia Raya*, before starting lessons and national or regional compulsory songs before the class ends, creating a rhythm of discipline integrated into the school culture. The internalization of values through routine activities such as a healthy lifestyle, discipline, and national spirit has proven effective in realizing the integration of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions to form a holistic student personality (Desmi Sofia et al., 2025).

Physical discipline and social norms are internalized through various operational habituations, such as the “Operation Ant” activity to maintain environmental cleanliness and the culture of queuing in the cafeteria and library. The school also mandates the scheduled performance of the “Great Indonesian Children’s Gymnastics” (*Senam Anak Indonesia Hebat*) to build physical fitness as well as a spirit

of cooperation among students. Students experience tangible benefits after routinely participating in these gymnastics; physically, it improves body fitness and immune systems. Furthermore, it fosters gross and fine motor coordination, which significantly aids in learning and playing activities. Psychologically, students exhibit a spirited aura in their daily lives in daily interactions, moral messages regarding the importance of mutual respect and the prohibition of bullying (*anti-bullying*) are consistently conveyed by teachers, ensuring that the school environment remains a safe social space for all students. This is in line with the view asserting that educational intervention is crucial for increasing student awareness and empathy to mitigate bullying behavior. According to them, schools are not merely places for knowledge transfer but must become ecosystems that support emotional and social well-being through a deep understanding of various types of bullying physical, verbal, and relational (Musfirah et al., 2025).

3. Integration Into Curriculum and Activities

The integration of character values at SDN 17 Tungkal Ilir is carried out by embedding moral messages into all subjects, ensuring that character education is not taught in isolation but is “brought to life” within every learning process. Teachers actively seek relevance between the subject matter and the values to be instilled; for instance, in Indonesian Language classes, students are assigned to write stories themed around honesty or responsibility. In Science (IPA), the value of environmental care is integrated through observations of the surroundings and the cultivation of responsibility in preserving the ecosystem, while in Mathematics, the value of honesty is emphasized during the problem-solving process. Group discussion methods are also consistently applied to train students in cooperation and collective responsibility during class. This is in line with research stating that ideal character education implementation must be integrated into the substance of the subjects rather than existing as a standalone supplementary material. Furthermore, other research emphasizes that this integration requires teacher creativity in designing learning scenarios capable of connecting academic content with student character formation in the classroom (Surmana et al., 2022).

Extracurricular activities, particularly Scouting (*Pramuka*), serve as a primary “character laboratory” where students directly practice the values of discipline, cooperation, and independence. In its implementation, the *Dasadharma* values of Scouting are applied through specific activities, such as Scout Marching Drills (*Latihan Baris-Berbaris* or LBB) to hone discipline, social service to instill the spirit of mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*), and outdoor exploration to build independence. The students’ success in achieving awards in various competitions, such as pioneering or cooking contests, is viewed by the school as a tangible result of the hard work and team cohesion ingrained within them. Scouting is not merely a supplementary activity but a primary means of shaping discipline and leadership. Activities like marching drills have empirically been shown to train student independence and strict time

management (Huda et al., 2024).

Character education is also integrated through a specialized program called the “7 Habits of Great Children” (*7 Kebiasaan Anak Hebat*) and various structured school routines. This program requires students to maintain a daily journal to document positive activities, such as discipline in worship and the responsibility of helping parents at home. In this regard, teachers strive to hold meetings with guardians to establish personal communication with parents to monitor the development of student character, ensuring that the values taught at school are also practiced at home (Cahyaningsih et al., 2020). Additionally, the Monday morning flag ceremony is utilized to instill values of nationalism and obedience to rules. Social habituations, such as the culture of queuing in the cafeteria or library, are also consistently applied to train patience and respect for the rights of others, ensuring that character values are internalized through daily practices within the school environment. Routine habituations and school programs, such as consistent flag ceremonies, are highly effective in internalizing nationalism and rule compliance among elementary school students (Khasanah & Lestari, 2024).

4. External Alliances and the “Benteng Sekolah” Program

The “School Fortress” (*Benteng Sekolah*) program is a strategic initiative developed by the School Principal to strengthen the defense of student character against various negative external influences. The primary focus of this partnership is to create a collective protection system involving the school, parents, and the school committee to align character development, aiming to ensure the continuity of values beyond the school environment (Huda et al., 2024). Through this program, the school strives to mitigate the risk of moral degradation triggered by the negative effects of technology, such as gadget addiction and exposure to online gambling, by establishing a shared understanding between the educational and family environments. Furthermore, teachers must possess specific strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of technology, which currently represent a major challenge in the character formation of young children (Khasanah & Lestari, 2024).

The practical implementation of this program is carried out through a formal partnership with the Police via the *Bhabinkamtibmas* (Community Policing Officer) and the *Kwarran* (Sub-district Scout Council), who were present during the sub-district jamboree (*Jambore Ranting*) in Tungkal Ilir to provide direct education to the students. The police officers delivered materials concerning legal discipline, the dangers of juvenile delinquency, and the adverse impacts of online gambling, which has begun to threaten elementary-aged children. The presence of security authorities within the school environment serves to provide a stronger moral emphasis for the students, ensuring that the character messages conveyed by teachers are reinforced by the legal and security perspectives of external parties.

In addition to the security sector, external partnerships also encompass active collaboration with health professionals from the local public health center (*Puskesmas*) to provide education on healthy lifestyles and mental health. To ensure the effectiveness of the program beyond the school environment, the principal implements a partnership strategy with parents through structured parenting activities and scheduled home visits. This multisectoral approach ensures that the external challenges faced by students are addressed in a structured manner, making all stakeholders an integral part of the "School Fortress" ecosystem, which preserves the moral integrity of students at SDN 17 Tungal Ilir.

5. Challenges and Adaptive Responses

The implementation of character education at SDN 17 Tungal Ilir faces multidimensional challenges stemming from both internal and external factors. Internally, the school encounters structural constraints in the form of time limitations and a dense curriculum workload. This aligns with previous research analysis stating that the demands of fulfilling curriculum materials often restrict teachers' capacity to perform deep internalization of values within each learning session (Susilo et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the most significant external challenge is the negative influence of digital technology, particularly uncontrolled gadget use, which triggers risks of gaming addiction and exposure to online gambling among students. As warned by (Nur Khasanah & Ima Rosila, 2025), this digital influence represents a serious threat that can lead to moral degradation if not promptly fortified with adaptive school strategies. Furthermore, varying levels of parental concern and diverse economic backgrounds pose obstacles in aligning character education between the school and home environments, considering that family collaboration is a key to character sustainability that is often difficult to standardize (Maisyaroh et al., 2023).

In response to these various obstacles, the School Principal has implemented structured and creative adaptive strategies. To overcome limitations in facilities and infrastructure, the principal encourages teachers and students to transform constraints into innovations, such as utilizing natural materials from the surrounding environment for Scouting activities and entrepreneurship practices. Internally, teacher capacity is continuously enhanced through routine supervision and mentoring to ensure that, despite the dense curriculum, moral values are still conveyed through effective and efficient learning methods.

To fortify students against the negative influences of technology and the external environment, the School Principal has taken responsive measures by strengthening strategic partnerships. This strategy is manifested through intensive internal education on digital literacy, as well as external collaboration with the *Bhabinkamtibmas* (Community Policing Officer) and the local Public Health Center (*Puskesmas*) via the *Kwarran* to provide early warnings regarding social hazards. Additionally, a personal approach to parents is conducted through programmed

home visits and parenting activities to build collective awareness. This adaptive response demonstrates the principal's role as a flexible leader in managing limited resources to maintain the sustainability of the character education ecosystem in a rural area.

Character education at SDN 17 Tungkal Ilir has been successfully implemented through a synergy of exemplary leadership, programmed habituation, and holistic curriculum integration. The principal's hands-on leadership serves as the primary foundation that transforms abstract values into concrete behaviors for students to emulate. Despite facing significant challenges, such as a dense curriculum workload and the threat of moral degradation from digital technology, adaptive strategies specifically the "School Fortress" program and multisectoral partnerships have proven effective in strengthening the defense of student character.

This success demonstrates that character formation at the elementary school level cannot be achieved through classroom instruction alone; rather, it requires a consistent ecosystem involving the school environment, families, and external authorities. The use of instruments such as the "7 Habits of Great Children" daily journal and the strengthening of digital literacy are key to maintaining the sustainability of moral values in the modern era. Thus, this collaborative and adaptive character education model can serve as a strategic reference for other educational institutions, particularly in rural areas, to produce a generation that is both academically intelligent and morally upright.

D. Conclusions

The central conclusion of this study is that the implementation of holistic leadership (comprising modelling, habituation, and integration) at SDN 17 Tungkal Ilir a school characterized by limited internal resources and acute external social challenges relies heavily on the adaptive leadership of the principal. A key finding reveals that the most impactful strategy is not merely internal in nature; rather, it is the principal's proactive initiative to forge external strategic alliances with the Bhabinkamtibmas (Community Police Officers) and Puskesmas (Community Health Centers). This collaboration is utilized specifically and pragmatically to fortify students against external threats such as online gambling and juvenile delinquency that the school cannot address independently, while simultaneously reinforcing internal modelling and habituation efforts.

Practically, this research implies that for schools in challenging environments, standard character education strategies are insufficient. The definition of holistic leadership must be expanded to include the leader's ability to actively "import" external authority and expertise as an integral component of the school ecosystem. Recommendations for future research include conducting a longitudinal analysis of the effectiveness and long-term impact of this tripartite collaboration model (school-

police-health center) on character formation and student resilience, as well as testing the application of similar models in diverse socio-geographical contexts with varying challenges.

While this research provides profound insights into holistic leadership, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, as a single-site case study conducted at SDN 17 Tungkal Ilir, the findings may have limited generalizability when applied to schools in major urban environments or significantly different cultural contexts. Second, given that character formation is a lifelong process, the temporal scope of this study cannot fully capture the long-term impact until the students reach full adulthood.

E. Acknowledgement

First and foremost, all praise and gratitude be to Allah SWT for His abundant grace and blessings, which have allowed for the completion of this article. Peace and blessings be upon the Prophet Muhammad SAW; may we receive his intercession in the hereafter. The author wishes to express sincere and profound gratitude to my husband, children, and family for their unwavering support. We would also like to extend our deepest appreciation to supervisors for their invaluable guidance, patience, and direction throughout the research process. Furthermore, we are grateful to Dr. Syaiful Eddy, M.Si. for his assistance in the scientific writing of this article, and to Dr. Muhammad Kristiawan, M.Pd. for his support in the publication of this journal. Special thanks are also directed to Mrs. Sri Setiyani, M.Pd., the Principal of SDN 17 Tungkal Ilir, along with the entire teaching staff, for their permission and openness in providing research information. Finally, we would like to thank our beloved family and friends for their endless prayers and moral support.

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