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Exploring Ihsan Values in School Leadership: A Spiritual Leadership Approach Among Headmasters in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how the Islamic value of 'ihsan' which emphasizes excellence, sincerity, and moral integrity shapes spiritual leadership practices among primary school headmasters in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. Adopting a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten headmasters representing diverse school settings, including both urban and rural contexts. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to capture varied leadership experiences and cultural environments. The findings suggest that *ihsan*-based spiritual leadership fosters ethical decision-making, respectful communication, and inner resilience among school leaders, particularly when facing administrative and cultural challenges. The study highlights how values such as honesty, fairness, and humility contribute to nurturing a positive school climate and enhancing teachers' and students' moral development. The results further indicate the importance of incorporating spiritual and ethical dimensions into leadership development programs to strengthen professional integrity and sustainable school governance. Theoretically, this research expands the discourse on faith-based leadership models, while practically, it offers insights into how Islamic ethical principles can be operationalized in educational administration to support the broader goals of moral and sustainable development.

Keywords:

Spiritual leadership, Islamic values, sustainable school governance, headmasters

1. Introduction

The changing needs of education in the twenty-first century have elevated ethical leadership to the fore of the conversation in education. Researchers and politicians are looking into leadership styles that are both successful and ethically sound due to growing concerns about value-based education, school governance, and student well-being. As a model that incorporates moral authority, inner drive, meaning, and purpose in leading others, spiritual leadership has become more well-known in this setting. Islamic principles serve as a crucial basis for schools in Muslim-

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majority societies, serving as guidance for deciding on matters of ethics, interpersonal interactions, and leadership techniques.

Investigating leadership styles that go beyond simple management or administrative efficacy is becoming more and more important in the contemporary educational environment. Leadership frameworks based on ethics, values, and spiritual awareness are receiving more attention. This is especially true when it comes to creating a school culture that prioritizes not only the accomplishment of institutional objectives but also the incorporation of spiritual elements into work practices and the development of admirable moral character and integrity among staff members and school leaders. In this regard, the spiritual leadership method offers a valuable framework that emphasizes inner strength as a basis for reaffirming moral and religious principles in the educational setting. This method shapes leadership practices with authenticity and moral consciousness by drawing on a deeper sense of responsibility to God and the larger community rather than just focusing on formal authority or external conformity.

Spirituality is a notion associated with internal aspects that have a substantial impact on the development of personal character, according to Ayob *et al.*, [5]. It includes elements that may not be readily apparent on the outside but have a profound impact on a person's soul, spirit, heart, and intellect. Spirituality affects people's attitudes, worldviews, and life goals and helps them form meaningful relationships with their environment. Therefore, it is thought that developing leaders who are not only proficient in administrative tasks but also motivated by strong ethical standards, real intents, and unambiguous beliefs requires a spiritual leadership style based on authentic spirituality. This is in line with the larger educational goal of creating balanced, academically, emotionally, and spiritually well-rounded people.

Islam views leadership as a trust that must be exercised with integrity, fairness ('adl), and accountability rather than merely a job title or authority [8]. Al-Hikmah (knowledge), al-Syaja'ah (courage), al-'Iffah (purity), and al-'Adlu (justice) are the four fundamental values established by Imam Al Ghazali. The qualities that a leader must possess are these four components. The foundation of moral leadership in the Islamic faith is the idea of ihsan, which implies acting in a way that maximizes our awareness of Allah's presence. According to Hadith recounted by Muslims, the Prophet PBUH stated, "Ihsan is that you worship Allah as if you saw Him. If you cannot see Him, He does see you." The cornerstones of spiritual leadership that leaders, particularly those in educational institutions, must uphold are the principles of civility [26]. This is due to the fact that schools are the most effective setting for educating and guiding pupils. Headmasters who uphold the virtues of civility are capable of handling any administrative dilemma as well as disputes involving instructors and pupils in educational institutions. This is due to the fact that these politeness values contain the infusion of moral principles that are highlighted in religion.

Regarding school leadership, particularly in Negeri Sembilan's primary schools, which are awash with Islamic principles and cultural heritage. In creating a positive school culture, headmasters play a critical role [4,17]. A profitable, compassionate, and morally grounded educational atmosphere is created when school leaders value and uphold the virtues of civility, such as trust, integrity, sincerity, fairness, and truth, as well as maintain manners and ethical communication. However, there are very few empirical studies looking at how these ideals are actually implemented in school leadership, especially in Malaysian mainstream schools. The majority of employed leadership styles are either neutral with regard to spiritual principles or still rely on Western methods [9,11]. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate headmasters' actual experiences recognizing and implementing the ideals of civility in their leadership. The purpose of this study is to comprehend how school culture, community ties, and holistic student development are impacted by spiritual leadership rooted in Islam. It is anticipated

that the findings of this study will support a discourse on educational leadership that is more contextual and values-based.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Spiritual Leadership in Education

Leadership approaches that are grounded in spiritual values, life's purpose, and internal drive are referred to as spiritual leadership. This paradigm places a strong emphasis on ideas like unconditional love, hope, and meaningful vision in addition to honesty in service (Fry, 2003; 25]. Spiritual leadership in education focuses on creating a school community that is motivated by values rather than just rules and regulations, fostering a meaningful and moral learning environment [9,20]. In order to promote a meaningful and values-driven school culture, spiritual leadership in education places a strong emphasis on incorporating moral, ethical, and spiritual principles into leadership activities. This leadership method, which is based on values like vision, altruistic love, and inner life, seeks to motivate teachers and students by encouraging a feeling of purpose, community, and moral obligation. Spiritual leadership provides a transformative approach that places a premium on honesty, compassion, and the holistic development of people in the face of mounting difficulties in the educational setting, such as moral quandaries and staff burnout [10,16]. Spiritual leadership enhances the general well-being of the school community and supports long-lasting educational reform by creating an environment founded on shared values and beliefs. Research indicates that school administrators who embrace a spiritual approach are more likely to establish authentic connections with school communities, cultivate a culture of trust, and enhance the mental health of both teachers and kids [22,24].

2.2 Leadership Based on Islamic Values

Islamic-based leadership is a comprehensive and moral strategy that prioritizes responsibility and deference to Allah. Muslims are taught to abstain from evil and to undertake good deeds. High spiritual values are highly valued in Islam when it comes to leadership since they preserve the peace and well-being of the individual being led. Islam has established some qualities that leaders must possess and uphold in order to safeguard the Muslim community. Ihsan ideals are among the qualities that a leader ought to possess. In order to receive a good reward from God, Ihsan is a responsible and quality-oriented person who always does things in a very good way, in a complete sense, in a nice and tasteful way, and who is never content with anything less than a quality job [6]. The following personality traits and leadership attributes displayed by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) serve as the foundation for Islamic leadership style, according to Febriana *et al.* (2024):

- i. *Siddiq*. The bravery to tell the truth, care about the truth, act or be true, support the truth, and protect the truth are all necessary for a true leader.
- ii. Trust. It involves being truthful in the performance of one's obligations, which includes being trustworthy, able to uphold trust in protecting secrets from other people or organizations, not abusing the trust bestowed, and not planning to conceal information that must be communicated to one's people. Without shielding or concealing anything out of self-interest
- iii. *Tabligh*. Aims to openly provide facts on topics that their people should be aware of
- iv. *Fathonah*. It signifies wise, which is the capacity to comprehend the teachings of Allah, solve the problems that his people encounter, and have the discernment to manage while making judgments that are just and equal.

The Four Cardinal Virtues the wisdom of *hikmah*, the justice of *adl*, the courage of *shajaah*, and the nature of self-preservation of *iffah* are explained by Al-Ghazali (1982; 1995) in Wan Razali et al., [23]. According to the survey, the primary admirable trait that leaders especially those who advocate for spiritual leadership should possess is knowledge. In areas like school management, wisdom will be able to make wise decisions. Headmasters must exercise sound judgment when managing schools to ensure that they function well and meet established objectives. The headmasters' decision-making and problem-solving skills demonstrate their wisdom. The headmaster's actions and words toward the school workers also demonstrate his knowledge. For example as in Figure 1.

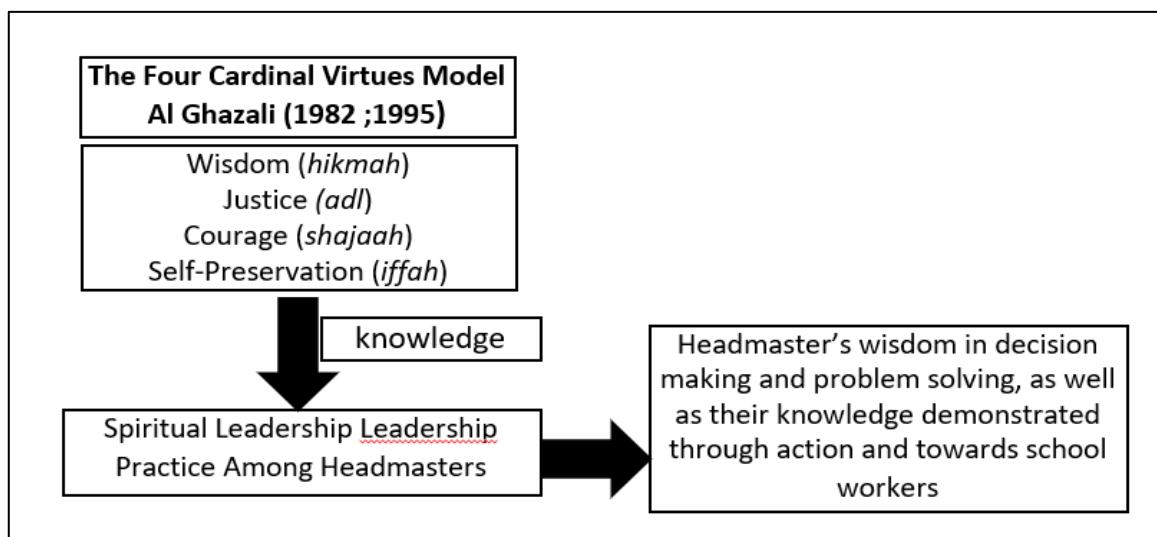


Fig. 1. The Four Cardinal Virtues Model of Islamic Leadership as conceptualized by Al-Ghazali (1982; 1995)

2.3 *Ihsan* as a Concept in Spiritual Leadership

Sincerity, seriousness, the beauty of morals, and the recognition of Allah's presence in every activity are all components of the idea of *ihsan*, which is the greatest level in the hierarchy of faith and Islam. The foundation for creating a learning environment that feeds the soul in the educational setting is the courteous principles of trust, sincerity, fairness, truthfulness, and maintaining manners. Al-Attas (1991) asserts that Islamic education seeks to develop moral people rather than merely bright pupils. In addition to dictating how leaders should behave, these politeness values also influence school culture, which helps pupils develop as individuals. From an Islamic standpoint, the idea of *ihsan* which signifies quality, sincerity, and the conscious experience of God's presence (*muraqabah*) is crucial in forming spiritual leadership. "To worship Allah as if you see Him, for if you do not see Him, He surely sees you" is the definition of *ihsan*, which has its roots in the prophetic tradition. This principle calls on leaders to follow the highest standards of moral behavior, inner integrity, and intentional action [15]. *Ihsan* serves as a transforming force in the context of spiritual leadership, bringing internal character and outward behavior into harmony. This ensures that leadership is motivated by humility, service to others, and honesty (*ikhlas*) rather than by selfish ambition or flimsy performance [13]. In addition to encouraging followers to act morally and with trust, leaders who exhibit *ihsan* also support a corporate culture rooted in compassion, justice, and accountability to God. In order to achieve the moral and spiritual goals of Islamic education, school administrators are encouraged to promote holistic development by integrating *ihsan*. This balances academic achievement with moral and spiritual growth.

In Islamic education, leadership based on *ihsan* values is a comprehensive approach that prioritizes the application of fundamental values that are derived from the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah, including truth (*sidq*), sincerity, fairness, trust, integrity, and the importance of manners in behavior and communication. Since leaders are viewed as caliphs who have a duty to Allah SWT as well as to society, all of their activities must be founded on justice, honesty, and openness [3]. Building trust between leaders and followers is largely dependent on the values of honesty and trust, while maintaining harmony and respect in organizational interactions is ensured by good communication practices [19]. Islamic-based leadership has the power to create a school culture that not only fosters academic success but also improves the moral, character, and spiritual development of the entire school community. Because of this, Islamic leadership is a pertinent and useful alternative paradigm for addressing the difficulties of modern leadership, which are frequently divorced from morality and ethics.

3. Methodology

According to Creswell (2021) and Meriam & Grenier (2019), the appropriateness and suitability of responding to the research questions are influenced by the study technique selection. Since this study examines the spiritual leadership approach in the leadership practices of primary school headmasters, the qualitative method is highly suited given the study's setting. To better understand headmasters' actual experiences implementing the ideals of civility in school leadership, this study used a qualitative design and a phenomenological approach. Researchers can investigate the deep significance of a person's life experience within their social and cultural context by using the phenomenological technique. In order to ensure that the informant was not linked to the questions asked, the researcher employed a semi-structured interview strategy to ensure that a variety of information was acquired from the informant. The researcher held an interview, and the interview technique worked well for getting more precise details about the informant's background and accomplishing the goals of the study. The semi-structured interview session enables the researcher to better establish interpersonal relationships with informants, including headmasters, who are typically unavailable through other means of gathering information, and to be ready with unexpected information when sharing information. This method was selected because it emphasizes the participants' subjective viewpoints and enables researchers to comprehend how Islamic spiritual ideals are applied within the framework of primary school headmaster leadership.

3.1 Informants' Backgrounds

In order to pick informants who are pertinent and capable of offering detailed information about spiritual leadership practices based on the value of *ihsan*, the purposive sampling method is employed. Ghazali and Sufean stated that the instrumentation, data collection technique, and study type all affect the sample size. According to Patton, unless the researcher wishes to obtain more detailed information from several perspectives, one to three samples should be adequate. This would enable the researcher to raise the relatively large number of samples to ten individuals. As a result, deliberate sampling is used to choose informants. Ten headmasters in all served as informants for this study, and they were interviewed using the given interview methodology. Headmasters from both urban and rural categories which included High Performance Schools (HPS), Cluster Schools, Grade A, and Grade B Schools were chosen for this study in order to obtain a general picture of headmasters.

Table 1
Background of informants'

No.	Informants	Sex	School	Category	Experience as Headmaster
1	A1	M	HPS	Urban	15 Yrs
2.	A2	F	Grade A	Rural	7 Yrs
3	A3	M	Grade B (K9)	Rural	8 Yrs
4	A4	M	Grade A	Urban	4 Yrs
5	A5	M	Grade B/ Cluster	Rural	3 Yrs
6	A6	M	Grade A	Urban	1 Yr
7	A7	M	Grade B/ Cluster	Rural	10 Yrs
8	A8	M	Grade B	Rural	6 Yrs
9	A9	F	Grade B	Rural	5 Yrs
10	A10	F	Grade A	Rural	4 Yrs

3.2 Techniques for Gathering Data

In this study, the semi-structured interview method served as the primary instrument. In an interview, the researcher asks the informant (the headmaster) questions in order to gather information. The interview is a two-way conversation with the goal of learning more. Researchers can provide prompt answers or feedback to fresh thoughts and insights that informants will provide through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews that followed the parameters for the questions but gave room for in-depth discussion of pertinent topics were used to gather data. With the participants' consent, the interviews were recorded and done in person in Bahasa Melayu. Depending on participant willingness and response, each interview lasts 45 to 60 minutes. For the aim of data triangulation, casual observations and supporting documentation (such as school activity logbooks, personality program notes, and headmasters' official speeches) were also examined.

4. Findings

The adoption of politeness principles in school leadership was found to be the dominant theme of a semi-structured interview with ten informants, all of whom were headmasters. These topics demonstrate how the headmaster appreciates and practically applies Islamic principles like justice, honesty, trust, and etiquette in the context of managing and developing students.

Table 2
Summary of findings

Theme	Related <i>Ihsan</i> Values	Impact on Schools and Pupils
Vision of trustworthy and sincere leadership	Trust, Sincere	Ethical leadership, students are more responsible
Example through morality and justice	Fair, Patient, True	Positive influence on students' discipline and respect
Appreciation of Islam in school culture	<i>Taqwa, Hikmah</i> , communications manners	Moral formation and spiritual balance
Civilized and rahmah communication	<i>Rahmah</i> , Manners, Tolerance	Creating a harmonious school environment

4.1 A Leadership Vision Predicated on Trust, Values, and Duties

As leaders who instruct and mold the morals of the pupils, the headmasters demonstrate that they have a clear vision of leadership that is based on trust. They regard the duty of education as a form of worship and a trust that needs to be carried out truthfully and completely. Establishing an ethical leadership culture in educational settings requires a leadership vision based on honesty and reliability. Teachers, students, and parents are among the stakeholders who trust school leaders, especially headmasters, when they exhibit sincere intentions and consistent behavior based on fairness and integrity. This trust serves as the cornerstone of moral leadership, which places equal emphasis on students' moral and character development as well as their intellectual achievement. As role models, sincere and honest leaders help pupils develop their moral principles and ethical behavior, which in turn helps them become more responsible adults [12,19]. A school climate that supports holistic development is shaped by values like accountability, discipline, respect, and fairness, which are continuously emphasized in day-to-day interactions and decision-making procedures. As a result, an authentic and honest leadership vision not only supports moral leadership practices but also raises a generation of students who are socially conscious and morally grounded.

"...I have always considered my duty as a headmaster not just a world's work, but a trust that will be questioned later. We don't just want students to be smart, but also to be moral people..." – A1

"... leading the entire school community to achieve the goals or vision of the school is one of the duties that must be carried out by the Headmaster because it will ensure that the school achieves the goals as planned..." – (A2)

4.2 Setting an Example for Leadership (Qudwah Hasanah)

The headmaster is a role model for both instructors and students, demonstrating the importance of honesty, tolerance, and equity in day-to-day operations. Instructors and students reported that the headmaster was modest, gave constructive criticism, and treated every student fairly.

"... The Headmaster must set the best example through a commendable attitude in ensuring that all teachers and staff respect his leadership and in turn influence teachers and staff to work together..." – (A4)

“... Leaders who have high spiritual values will be able to influence all school staff to work together and be able to increase employee motivation through spiritual touches that start from within a person...”- (A6)

“... The nature of grace or kindness and loving teachers and staff with an attitude of caring or understanding of the problems faced will be able to ensure that a vision can be achieved successfully...”- (A7)

The aforementioned statement makes it abundantly evident that attaining a planned vision necessitates spiritual values that are highly significant for the entire school community and the local community in general, as well as for teachers and staff in particular. Effective professors clearly communicate the leadership vision, which is founded on spiritual principles like compassion, *ihsan*, trust, and a sense of duty as a caliph. The offered vision specifies a path that uplifts the soul and touches on human values in addition to being an academic or administrative goal.

4.3 Islamic Values' Application in School Culture

The headmaster incorporates Islamic components into school culture and activities, such as the weekly *tazkirah*, the recital of morning prayers, and the value placed on good manners in social situations. It transforms the school into a place where students can continuously develop their character outside of Islamic education lessons.

“... as a Headmaster I need to be smart in communicating and I practice how to communicate using polite words because I believe that good words can soften the hearts of teachers and staff who are quite hard-hearted...”- (A3)

“... Giving encouragement and kind words to the school community is a culture that I practice and believe that good words are a prayer...”- (A9)

“... I emphasize the aspect of manners and supporting the school community and the local community because each individual has their own duties and functions in helping to improve the performance of the school...”- (A10)

According to the Islamic perspective, spiritual leadership involves good leadership practices. All actions and deeds will be evaluated and rewarded by Allah, who will reward good organizational management techniques and punish bad ones with sins.

4.4 Rahmah-Based Communication and Leadership Styles

The headmaster has a kind and considerate attitude toward the well-being of both instructors and students. All phases of engagement involve the use of polite and courteous communication. Students' self-confidence and discipline are immediately increased when they feel valued and liked.

“... Good communication can motivate and improve the quality of work of teachers and staff because they clearly understand the instructions and goals of the organization...”- (A5)

"... cultivating teachers and staff by greeting and greeting Muslims is a very good practice and adds harmony among the school community..."- (P7)

"... I am confident and believe that all the good things I do in administering the organization will be well rewarded by Allah..."- (A8)

The importance of communication from an Islamic perspective is evident in the following aspects: spreading da'wah, maintaining human relations and relationships with Allah, implementing sharia demands, upholding the principle of practicing goodness and preventing evil, carrying out whatever Allah commands, and avoiding or staying away from all His prohibitions. It is evident that there are principles or manners of communication that must be implemented in Islam itself in order to maintain human relations and relationships with Allah. It is extremely important to cultivate effective and prudent communication in order to enable an organization to achieve its desired vision.

5. Discussion

The four main themes found in the findings demonstrate how Islamic values can be practically translated in the context of school management and the development of students' personalities. This study demonstrates that the values of courtesy, such as trust, fairness, sincerity, truth, manners, and *rahmah* (merciful and compassionate love), are not only the foundation of individual morality but also serve as the main principles in the leadership practice of headmasters in primary schools. The findings show that headmasters see leadership as a trust that must be carried with full responsibility and spiritual awareness. This is in line with the principles of Islamic leadership, which emphasize the concept of caliphate and *mas'uliyyah* (responsibility towards Allah and man), as described by Mutalib *et al.*, [14]. When leadership is carried out as worship, decisions and actions become more honest, fair, and transparent. The role of headmasters as models of ethical behavior is clearly evident in this study. As stated by Reave [19], spiritual leaders do not simply convey values through speech but through behavior that is consistent with the moral principles held. This also coincides with the approach of the Prophet PBUH as a leader, *uswah hasanah*, who leads with gentleness, justice, and politeness.

The leadership of the headmaster in building an Islamic-based school culture, such as prayer reading, *tazkirah*, and emphasis on manners, shows seriousness in integrating spirituality into the school structure and system. This is in line with the Islamic education model as explained by Qasserras [18], which is education as a process of purification of the mind and soul, not just the transfer of knowledge. The headmaster's gentle approach, listening patiently, and giving prudent reprimands are manifestations of the values of grace and wisdom in communication. This is very much in line with the principle of communication in Islam, which emphasizes *qaulan sadidan* (the right word) and *qaulan layyinah* (the gentle word), as stated in Surah Al-Ahzab and Surah Taha. This approach not only builds healthy relationships but also increases students' willingness to change positively. This study reinforces the argument that spiritual leadership in the context of Islamic education is not limited to Western concepts such as Fry (2003) but needs to be raised based on a more holistic Islamic value framework. The value of *ihsan* not only forms the spiritual dimension but also touches the social, emotional, and intellectual aspects of leadership. Thus, the results of this study can contribute to the production of a spiritual leadership model that is local, contextual, and revelation-centered.

The study's findings reveal that headmasters who internalize *ihsan* values demonstrate stronger emotional balance, moral awareness, and integrity in their decision-making. These spiritual values influence how they interact with teachers and students, manage conflicts, and nurture a culture of mutual respect and compassion in the school environment. The participants associated *ihsan* with excellence not only in performance but also in moral conduct striving to serve with sincerity (*ikhlas*), fairness (*adil*), and humility (*tawadhu'*).

Moreover, *ihsan*-based leadership was seen as a protective factor against stress and burnout, as leaders drew on spiritual motivation to remain resilient in facing administrative constraints and policy demands. Teachers under such leadership models reported higher trust and commitment, which in turn fostered a cooperative school climate. This aligns with prior studies [9,14] that highlight the interconnection between spiritual values, organizational well-being, and leadership effectiveness. The findings also reinforce the idea that leadership effectiveness in Muslim-majority contexts must integrate not only managerial competencies but also moral-spiritual consciousness that guides ethical behavior. In the context of Malaysia's educational goals, embedding *ihsan* within school leadership aligns with both national education philosophy and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasizing moral responsibility and lifelong learning. For example, as in figure 2

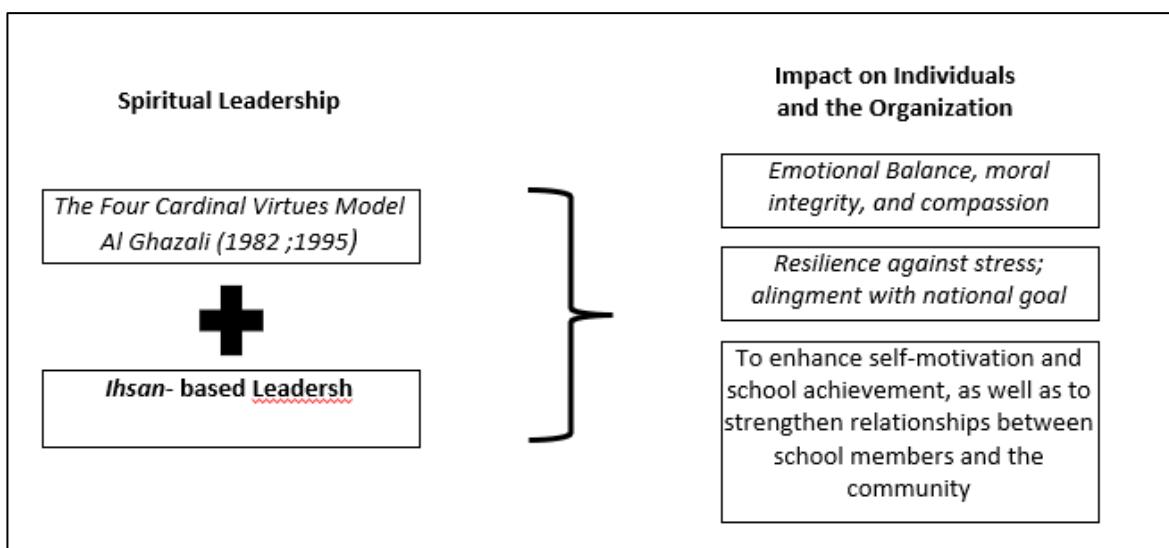


Fig. 2. Spiritual leadership and *ihsan*-based leadership: Impacts on individuals and the organization

6. Research Consequences

This study emphasizes the need for school leaders to integrate Islamic spiritual values and morals in every aspect of leadership. Leadership training should include spiritual, emotional, and ethical dimensions, not just technical aspects. Headmasters are advised to be a model of courtesy values to teachers and students through daily practice. The Ministry of Education Malaysia and relevant authorities are advised to re-evaluate the competency standards of educational leadership to include spiritual values, manners, and morals. Leadership training modules that are centered on Islamic values and local culture need to be developed to build a generation of school leaders who are highly ethical educators. This study opens up space for broader and in-depth advanced studies involving various states, school backgrounds, and educational administrative dimensions. Quantitative studies can also be done to build an instrument for measuring the value

of courtesy in school leadership, thus strengthening the Islamic spiritual leadership model in theory and practice.

7. Conclusion

This study offers a novel perspective on educational leadership by examining how *ihsan*-based spiritual values influence the ethical and administrative practices of headmasters in Negeri Sembilan. Through semi-structured interviews, the qualitative approach enabled the researcher to capture the lived experiences and cultural nuances of leadership guided by Islamic moral principles. The findings suggest the potential for headmasters who embody *ihsan* values to promote ethical school management, strengthen moral development among staff and students, and cultivate a culture of mutual respect and trust. While these insights are context-specific to primary schools in Negeri Sembilan, they provide a valuable framework for understanding faith-informed leadership within diverse educational settings. The small sample size and regional scope represent limitations that may affect generalizability, yet they also highlight the depth of understanding afforded by qualitative exploration.

Future research should expand this inquiry through comparative studies across different Malaysian states or international contexts, quantitative investigations to validate the identified leadership attributes, and longitudinal research to examine the long-term impact of *ihsan*-based leadership development. Collectively, such studies could strengthen both the theoretical foundation and practical application of spiritual leadership, positioning *ihsan* as a guiding principle for ethical, sustainable, and human-centered educational administration.

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