

Ethics-Based Educational Leadership in Junior High Schools in the Digital Era: Dynamics of Challenges and Strategies for Strengthening Educational Quality

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of the digital era has transformed how junior high schools (SMP) manage instruction, communication, supervision, and educational services holistically. On one hand, digitalization offers significant opportunities for management efficiency, expanded access to information, and enhanced instructional quality; on the other, it presents challenges such as the digital literacy gap, the erosion of human-centric relationships, professional ethics issues, and escalating demands for accountability. This article aims to analyze the dynamics of ethics-based educational leadership challenges in junior high schools during the digital era and to formulate strategies for strengthening educational quality that are relevant, adaptive, and dignified. A descriptive-qualitative literature review method was employed, involving the exploration and synthesis of literature on educational leadership, quality management, educational supervision, and digital transformation. The findings indicate that educational leadership in junior high schools during the digital era must rest on four key pillars: visionary leadership, professional ethics, human-centric digital transformation, and a sustainable quality assurance system. Strategies to enhance educational quality can be realized through strengthening a culture of quality, building the capacity of principals and teachers, implementing data-driven academic supervision, and integrating ethical values into school governance. This article asserts that ethics-based educational leadership is not merely an administrative tool but a strategic foundation for building schools that are excellent, principled, and dignified in the digital era.

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Introduction

Digital transformation has brought significant changes to various aspects of life, including the education sector. Developments in information technology, artificial

intelligence, big data, cloud computing, and various digital learning platforms have transformed school management patterns, learning processes, evaluation systems, and even the governance of educational organizations. At the junior high school (SMP) level, these changes present both opportunities and challenges, requiring principals to not only master managerial skills but also to possess adaptive, visionary, innovative, and ethical leadership skills. In this context, educational leadership is no longer understood solely as administrative skills, but rather as the ability to build an organizational culture that is imbued with integrity, humanism, and oriented toward continuously improving the quality of education (Raprap et al., 2025; Hasan & Rahmi, 2025).

The digital era is characterized by the increasing complexity of the educational environment due to accelerated technological developments, changing characteristics of digital-generation students, demands for 21st-century competencies, and educational policies that increasingly emphasize innovation and flexibility. Principals are required to make quick, data-driven decisions, build collaborations with various stakeholders, and create learning environments that are adaptive to change. However, the digital transformation process often raises various ethical issues, such as misuse of technology, weak student data protection, increased plagiarism, low digital literacy, and reduced meaningful social interactions within the school environment. These conditions demonstrate that the success of digital transformation cannot rely solely on technological sophistication but requires leadership grounded in moral values and educational ethics (Kurniawan & Lazwardi, 2025; Setiawan & Lestari, 2025).

From the perspective of modern educational leadership, ethics is the primary foundation of every organizational decision-making process. Ethical leadership places the values of honesty, fairness, responsibility, transparency, caring, and accountability as the foundation for managing all educational resources. An ethical principal focuses not only on achieving administrative targets or performance indicators but also ensures that every policy adopted creates a democratic, inclusive school climate that respects the dignity of all school members. Therefore, ethics-based leadership is a crucial prerequisite for building trust between principals, teachers, educational staff, students, and the community, thereby improving the overall quality of education (Yufriyani et al., 2026; Hasan & Rahmi, 2025).

At the junior high school level, leadership complexity increases because students are in the early adolescent development phase, requiring balanced academic, social, emotional, and moral support. Principals are responsible not only for academic achievement but also for developing students' character through a positive school culture. In the digital era, these challenges are exacerbated by the increased use of social media, the spread of unverified information, cyberbullying, gadget addiction, and the declining quality of social interactions among students. This phenomenon demonstrates that educational leadership must be able to integrate digital skills with the strengthening of ethical values so that schools remain effective spaces for character education (Azizah et al., 2025; Mulyadi, 2025).

In addition to internal challenges, schools also face external pressures in the form of demands to improve educational quality, implement the Independent Curriculum (Curriculum Merdeka), strengthen teacher competencies, school accreditation, and implement the Internal Quality Assurance System (SPMI), which increasingly emphasizes a culture of sustainable quality. In this context, school principals hold a strategic position as change agents capable of integrating visionary leadership with digital-based quality assurance systems. The use of information technology in school data management, academic supervision, learning evaluation, and evidence-based decision-making is a key indicator of successful educational leadership in the digital era (Raprap et al., 2026; Warta et al., 2026; Badrun & Siswoyo, 2025).

Various studies have shown that transformational and visionary leadership have a

positive influence on improving school quality. Transformational leaders are able to build intrinsic teacher motivation, strengthen a collaborative culture, encourage learning innovation, and increase the effectiveness of educational organizations. Meanwhile, visionary leadership plays a role in formulating a school development direction that is adaptive to changes in the strategic environment. However, these studies generally focus more on organizational transformation and school digitalization without adequate attention to the ethical dimension as a foundation for leadership. However, digitalization without strengthening ethics has the potential to produce leadership practices that are solely oriented towards efficiency and ignore human values (Dahlani et al., 2025; Hermansyah et al., 2026).

Furthermore, strengthening educational quality cannot be separated from the principal's ability to develop a quality culture. A quality culture is not only related to meeting national education standards but also reflects the commitment of the entire school community to continuous improvement. The principal is responsible for establishing an objective evaluation system, constructive academic supervision, teacher professional development, and utilizing digital technology as a quality improvement instrument. Therefore, ethics-based leadership is a key driver in creating a culture of quality oriented toward equitable and high-quality educational services (Dewi, 2025; Warta et al., 2026; Badrun & Siswoyo, 2025).

Previous research also shows that the success of digital transformation in schools is significantly influenced by the principal's capacity to manage organizational change. Leadership that integrates values, organizational culture, technology, and human resource development will result in educational organizations that are more adaptive to global dynamics. Conversely, weak leadership often leads to resistance to innovation, low quality educational services, and suboptimal implementation of various national education policies. Therefore, ethics-based educational leadership needs to be viewed as a comprehensive strategy to bridge the needs of digital transformation with strengthening the character of school organizations (Norjanah et al., 2025; Jahudin et al., 2025; Fathullah & Padliator, 2026).

Based on a review of these studies, a research gap remains regarding the integration of ethics-based leadership, digital transformation, and strategies for strengthening educational quality, particularly at the junior high school level. Most studies discuss digital leadership, transformational leadership, or quality assurance systems separately, while studies integrating these three aspects within a single conceptual framework are relatively limited. Yet, the success of schools in the digital era is largely determined by the principal's ability to balance the use of technology with the application of ethical values as the basis for organizational decision-making (Yazidah et al.; Zai & Carlos, 2024).

Based on this, this article aims to analyze the dynamics and challenges of ethics-based educational leadership at the junior high school level in the digital era and formulate strategies for strengthening educational quality through the development of visionary, transformational, values-oriented leadership, supported by a digital-based quality assurance system. The article's primary contribution is to offer a conceptual synthesis that integrates the dimensions of ethics, digital leadership, quality culture, and educational management as a framework for developing school leadership relevant to the demands of 21st-century education and Society 5.0.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a library research approach. This approach was chosen because the research aimed to deeply analyze the concept of ethics-based educational leadership at the junior high school (SMP) level in the digital era, identify

the dynamics of challenges faced by school principals, and formulate strategies for strengthening educational quality based on the synthesis of various recent scientific studies. Library research enabled researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of theoretical developments, previous research findings, and educational leadership practices relevant to digital transformation and strengthening a school quality culture (Raprap et al., 2025; Hasan & Rahmi, 2025).

The research data sources consisted of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained from twenty primary references that served as the basis for the analysis, including national scientific journal articles, academic books, and scientific papers published between 2023 and 2026. These references discussed educational leadership, values-based leadership, transformational leadership, visionary leadership, digital leadership, educational quality assurance systems, academic supervision, digital transformation in education, and school quality improvement strategies. Secondary data was obtained from various supporting literature related to the concepts of ethical leadership, educational management, quality culture, and national education policies relevant to school leadership development in the digital era (Rahmi et al., 2023; Jahudin et al., 2025).

Data collection was conducted through documentation study, which involved searching, identifying, classifying, and inventorying various scientific documents related to the research focus. Each literature was selected based on several criteria: relevance to the theme of ethics-based educational leadership, discussing the dynamics of digital transformation in school management, containing strategies for improving educational quality, and publication by credible scientific journals or academic publishers. Furthermore, all documents were systematically reviewed to obtain information on concepts, models, strategies, and empirical findings that support the research discussion (Mulyadi, 2025; Dewi, 2025).

Data analysis was conducted using content analysis, with stages developed through data reduction, data presentation, interpretation, conceptual synthesis, and conclusion drawing. The first stage is data reduction, which involves selecting information relevant to the research focus, specifically regarding ethics-based leadership, digital leadership, visionary leadership, transformational leadership, and educational quality assurance systems. The second stage is categorization, which involves grouping data into key themes that illustrate the dynamic challenges of educational leadership in the digital age. The third stage is comparative analysis, which involves comparing various researchers' perspectives to identify similarities, differences, trends, and the contribution of each study to the development of the concept of ethics-based educational leadership. The final stage is conceptual synthesis, which involves developing a conceptual model for strategies to strengthen educational quality through the integration of ethical values, digital leadership, quality culture, and transformational leadership as a framework for 21st-century school leadership (Yufriyani et al., 2026; Hermansyah et al., 2026; Raprap et al., 2026).

To ensure data validity, the study employed source triangulation, comparing various research findings, theories, and concepts from scientific journals and academic books to obtain consistent and scientifically reliable information. Furthermore, theoretical triangulation was conducted by integrating perspectives from values-based leadership, transformational leadership, visionary leadership, digital leadership, educational management, and educational quality assurance systems. This process aims to produce a more objective, in-depth, and comprehensive interpretation of ethics-based educational leadership strategies for improving the quality of education at the junior high school level in the digital era (Dahlani et al., 2025; Setiawan & Lestari, 2025; Badrun & Siswoyo, 2025).

The results of the analysis are then presented descriptively-analytically, namely by outlining the relationships between concepts, explaining the dynamics of educational

leadership challenges in the digital era, and formulating strategies for strengthening educational quality based on the synthesis of various previous research results. Through this approach, this article not only describes the phenomena that occur, but also produces a conceptual framework that can be a reference for school principals, educational administrators, and researchers in developing an ethics-based educational leadership model that is adaptive to the development of digital technology without neglecting moral values, professionalism, and a culture of sustainable educational quality (Azizah et al., 2025; Riyanto, 2026; Yazidah et al.).

Results and Discussion

1. The Dynamics of Educational Leadership Challenges in Junior High Schools in the Digital Era

The development of the digital era has fundamentally changed the face of educational leadership. Principals are no longer faced solely with routine administrative issues, but rather with new complexities that demand rapid adaptation, accurate decisions, and ethical steadfastness in managing change. At the junior high school level, these changes are even more pronounced because students are at a developmental stage that is highly sensitive to the influence of technology, social media, digital communication patterns, and the increasingly fluid dynamics of learning culture. In this context, educational leadership cannot be understood simply as a control function, but must be interpreted as a process of establishing direction, maintaining values, and ensuring the continued growth of educational quality amidst the currents of digital disruption. (Hermansyah, 2026).

One of the most prominent challenges is the issue of technology and digital literacy. Schools are indeed increasingly familiar with learning platforms, academic information systems, communication applications, and various digital devices that support educational management. However, the presence of technology does not automatically improve the quality of leadership. In fact, without adequate digital literacy capacity, technology can become an additional burden that complicates the work of principals and teachers. Kurniawan and Lazwardi emphasized that digital learning leadership requires the ability to intelligently manage technology while maintaining the quality of learning to avoid becoming trapped in the mere formality of device use (Kurniawan, 2025). In other words, the main challenge lies not in the presence or absence of technology, but rather in the extent to which technology is understood as a tool to strengthen the educational process, not replace it.

This situation is increasingly important because many schools lack balanced organizational readiness to embrace digital change. In a number of junior high schools, the use of digital systems is still limited to reporting, attendance, or basic administration, while its utilization for learning development, academic supervision, and quality evaluation remains suboptimal. As a result, digitalization is often perceived merely as a policy requirement, rather than as an instrument of transformation. If this situation is allowed to continue, schools risk experiencing a gap between the demands of the times and the readiness of their human resources. Therefore, educational leadership in junior high schools must be directed at strengthening the digital capacity of the school community as a whole, not just the procurement of technological devices.

The next challenge relates to professional ethics. In the digital era, the boundaries between formal and informal spaces are becoming increasingly blurred. Principals, teachers, and education personnel are judged not only by their face-to-face performance at school, but also by how they communicate, make decisions, and project their professional identity in the digital space. This situation demands a strong professional ethics to ensure that every leadership action remains within moral and educational boundaries. Yufriyani

et al. emphasize that values-based educational leadership is a crucial response to 21st-century challenges because values are the foundation that maintains institutional integrity amidst rapid change (Yufriyani, 2026). This demonstrates that digitalization without ethics has the potential to produce educational practices devoid of human values.

In practice, professional ethics serves as a moral compass that guides school leaders in using technology wisely, fairly, and responsibly. Managing student data, disseminating school information, communicating with parents, and responding to issues that go viral on social media require a high level of discretion. Schools must not only pursue speed but also uphold the honor of the institution and the dignity of students. Badrun and Siswoyo emphasized that modern school quality assurance must be based on a system that is not only efficient, but also capable of building a quality culture rooted in professional values and responsibilities (Badrun, 2025). So, professional ethics is not an additional aspect, but rather one of the main foundations of dignified educational leadership.

The third challenge is organizational change in schools. The digital era presents rapid policy dynamics, ranging from curriculum transformation and independent learning to demands for increasingly participatory educational services. Schools are required to be flexible and responsive to changes in both internal and external environments. In this context, school leadership needs to be able to strategically manage organizational transitions to prevent confusion, resistance, or loss of direction. Setiawan and Lestari state that digital learning leadership requires principals to be able to lead change strategically and participatively, as successful change is always underpinned by the ability to read the situation and mobilize the people within it (Setiawan, 2025).

Organizational change in junior high schools involves not only administrative tools but also the mindset, work culture, and learning habits of the entire school community. Principals who are unprepared to lead change tend to implement transformations partially, resulting in superficial innovations without addressing the substance. Conversely, adaptive leadership will be able to connect policies, teacher needs, student character, and community expectations more synergistically. Organizational change must be understood as a collective learning process, not simply a structural adjustment. Within this framework, school leaders act as both change agents and facilitators, fostering collective readiness to move toward improved quality.

Furthermore, the digital era also presents challenges in maintaining a balance between humanism and digitalization. Digitalization often encourages schools to prioritize quickly measurable, numerically based, and technical indicators. However, education is essentially a humanization process that fosters relationships, caring, role models, and character development. Azizah et al. point out that principals' managerial strategies need to bridge humanism and digitalization to prevent schools from becoming trapped in a technocratic approach that neglects the human side (Azizah, 2025). For junior high schools, this aspect is crucial because students still need emotional closeness, personal attention, and a learning environment full of examples.

If digitalization is not placed within a humanistic framework, schools risk becoming highly efficient institutions that lack warmth. Teachers may be preoccupied with applications, online reports, and digital administration, but lose time to build meaningful pedagogical communication with students. Principals may also become caught up in data and performance indicators without examining the quality of actual classroom interactions. And educational leadership in junior high schools needs to ensure that technology serves to strengthen human relationships in education, not replace them. This is why ethics-based leadership is so important: it ensures that technical progress aligns with the mission of humanizing students.

The fifth challenge is sustainable quality assurance. Digitalization is often assumed to

immediately improve educational quality, but the reality is not that simple. Without a strong culture of quality, technology becomes merely an administrative tool that speeds up work but does not necessarily improve results. Warta et al. emphasize that contemporary educational quality assurance must be built through a culture of quality and continuous improvement, not simply through completing formal documents or reports (Warta, 2026). Meanwhile, Raprap et al. also point out that digital-based educational management must be accompanied by a clear evaluation system so that institutional quality can be consistently monitored and improved (Raprap, 2026).

From this perspective, educational quality does not arise from a single major decision, but from a series of orderly processes: thorough planning, disciplined implementation, honest evaluation, and concrete follow-up. Schools with a culture of quality will use evaluation as a means of reflection, not merely an administrative assessment. Teachers and principals work together to analyze data, identify weaknesses, and formulate corrective measures that can be implemented gradually. In this way, digitalization truly becomes a quality enhancer, not just a symbol of modernity. This is where ethical leadership is crucial: it places technology within a framework of continuous, measurable improvement that supports the quality of education.

Taken together, these five challenges demonstrate that educational leadership in junior high schools in the digital era lies at the intersection of innovation and integrity. Principals must master technology but also maintain professional ethics; they must lead change but maintain humanism; they must encourage digitalization but also ensure a consistent culture of quality. Therefore, ethics-based educational leadership is not merely an ideal choice but a strategic necessity for building schools that are adaptive, dignified, and competitive amidst changing times.

2. Ethics-Based Leadership as the Foundation of School Quality

Ethics-based leadership is the primary foundation for building sustainable school quality, particularly at the junior high school (SMP) level, where it plays a crucial role in shaping students' character, personality, and learning culture. In the digital era, principals are no longer merely required to possess managerial and administrative skills, but must also be moral role models (moral leaders) capable of integrating ethical values into every policy, decision, and school work culture. Ethics-oriented leadership will foster school governance that is transparent, accountable, and fair, and oriented toward quality educational services. From this perspective, school quality is measured not only by academic achievement but also by the quality of interpersonal relationships, organizational integrity, and the school's ability to instill character values in all school members (Yufriyani, 2026).

Within educational organizations, ethical leadership serves as a normative foundation that guides all school activities to ensure they remain aligned with national education goals. Principals who uphold the values of honesty, responsibility, professionalism, and fairness will more easily earn the trust of teachers, education staff, students, and the community. This trust is crucial social capital in building a healthy organizational culture. Hasan and Rahmi explain that values-based school leadership not only strengthens organizational systems but also creates stability in the face of change because every policy is always based on mutually agreed-upon moral principles (Hasan, 2025). Therefore, ethical leadership is not simply a set of behavioral rules but rather the energy that drives all school components toward a common goal.

The digital era presents new challenges that further emphasize the urgency of ethics-based leadership. The use of information technology in the learning process, administrative management, communication with parents, and data-driven decision-making requires principals to possess high integrity. Issues such as student data security, the dissemination

of information through social media, the use of artificial intelligence, and transparency in school management are ethical issues that cannot be resolved through technical approaches alone. Therefore, school leaders must be able to use ethical values as a guideline in determining policy direction so that digital transformation remains aligned with the interests of students and does not neglect human aspects (Kurniawan, 2025).

Furthermore, ethics-based leadership directly contributes to the formation of a quality culture in schools. A quality culture does not emerge simply through document development or compliance with accreditation standards, but rather stems from the habits of all school members working professionally, with discipline, openness to evaluation, and a commitment to continuous improvement. Badrun and Siswoyo emphasize that a modern school quality assurance system must be built through an organizational culture that prioritizes integrity, accountability, and continuous improvement (Badrun, 2025). Therefore, an ethical principal not only oversees program implementation but also builds a collective awareness that quality is the responsibility of all school members.

The relationship between ethical leadership and school quality is also evident in the decision-making process. Principals are faced daily with various issues that require professional judgment, ranging from the distribution of teacher tasks and resolving conflicts between school members and managing budgets to determining learning policies. Decisions made objectively, transparently, and with student interests in mind will enhance leadership legitimacy and strengthen a culture of mutual trust. Conversely, decisions influenced by personal or group interests will weaken the spirit of collaboration and diminish the quality of the school organization. Therefore, the ethical dimension is a determining factor in the long-term effectiveness of leadership (Dahlioni, 2025).

Ethics-based leadership also plays a crucial role in building teacher professionalism. Teachers will more readily accept direction, supervision, and evaluation if the principal demonstrates exemplary behavior, communication, and work ethic. This exemplary behavior creates a positive organizational climate, so that supervision is perceived not as a form of supervision, but rather as a professional development process. Rahmi et al. emphasized that educational supervision in the Society 5.0 era must be developed through a collaborative approach oriented toward improving teacher competency, not merely fulfilling administrative requirements. (Rahmi, 2025) In this context, ethical leadership is a prerequisite for supervision to create sustainable changes in professional behavior.

Furthermore, ethics-based leadership plays a strategic role in maintaining a balance between digital innovation and humanistic values. While digitalization can improve the efficiency of school management, education remains, in essence, a process of humanizing human beings. Azizah et al. demonstrates that principals need to bridge humanism and digitalization so that educational transformation does not lose its moral and social dimensions (Azizah, 2025). At the junior high school level, this balance is crucial because students are in the phase of forming their own identities, so they need leaders and teachers who are not only academically competent but also capable of being role models in their attitudes and actions.

Ethical leadership also encourages the growth of responsible innovation. Educational innovation is not solely measured by the widespread use of technology, but by the extent to which such innovation improves the quality of learning, expands educational access, strengthens student character, and creates a safe and inclusive learning environment. Raprap et al. explain that the Educational Leadership 5.0 paradigm positions school leaders as drivers of transformation who must be able to combine technological sophistication with humanitarian values so that schools do not lose their identity as character-building institutions (Raprap, 2026). Ethics-based leadership serves as a bridge between innovation and social responsibility in educational delivery.

Furthermore, ethics-based leadership also strengthens the implementation of a school's internal quality assurance system. Warta et al. explains that a sustainable quality culture can only be built if there is a shared commitment to the values of integrity, objective evaluation, and the courage to pursue continuous improvement (Warta, 2026). A principal who makes ethics the foundation of leadership will encourage all school members to embrace evaluation as part of the organizational learning culture, rather than as a fault-finding mechanism. Thus, the quality assurance system evolves into a reflective process that continuously strengthens the quality of educational services.

Based on the results of a synthesis of various literature, it is understood that ethics-based leadership is a strategic foundation for building school quality in the digital era. Ethics not only guides the behavior of individual leaders but also shapes organizational culture, strengthens teacher professionalism, increases public trust, and ensures that digital transformation aligns with educational goals. In other words, schools led by ethical values will be better able to build an adaptive, innovative, and sustainable quality culture than schools focused solely on administrative achievement. Therefore, strengthening ethics-based leadership must be a primary agenda in developing junior high school education management to produce superior, character-based, and dignified education amidst the dynamics of the digital era.

3. Strategies for Strengthening Educational Quality in Junior High Schools in the Digital Era

A synthesis of various literature shows that strengthening educational quality at the junior high school (SMP) level in the digital era can no longer be achieved through conventional administrative approaches. Digital transformation has shifted the paradigm of school management from a system oriented toward adherence to procedures to a learning organization that prioritizes innovation, collaboration, data-driven decision-making, and continuous quality improvement. In this context, the principal plays a central role as an instructional leader, digital leader, and ethical leader capable of integrating digital technology with ethical values throughout the school management process. Such leadership will result in more adaptive, transparent, and accountable school governance, capable of effectively responding to changes in the educational environment (Raprap et al., 2026; Kurniawan & Lazwardi, 2025; Hasan & Rahmi, 2025).

Analysis of various studies shows that the first strategy for strengthening educational quality is building a quality culture as the school's organizational identity. A quality culture is not simply a set of rules or operational standards, but rather a value system internalized by all school members in every educational activity. The principal acts as an agent of change, instilling a commitment to quality improvement through role modeling, open communication, appreciation for innovation, and the practice of continuous self-evaluation. When a quality culture becomes part of the organizational culture, all teachers, education staff, and students will have a collective awareness to continuously strive for improvement without having to wait for external oversight. This condition is a crucial foundation for the successful implementation of the Internal Quality Assurance System (SPMI) in schools (Warta et al., 2026; Badrun & Siswoyo, 2025).

The second strategy is strengthening instructional leadership, which is oriented towards improving the quality of the teaching and learning process. The literature shows that effective principals not only carry out administrative functions but also actively supervise academics, provide feedback to teachers, facilitate continuous professional development, and encourage technology-based learning innovation. Collaborative academic supervision has been proven to enhance teachers' pedagogical competence, improve the quality of learning, and strengthen a culture of reflection within the teacher learning community. Thus, the quality of education is measured not only by students' academic achievements

but also by the continuous improvement of the professional capacity of educators (Rahmi et al., 2023; Dewi, 2025).

In the digital era, another strategy that has a significant impact on improving educational quality is strengthening the digital literacy of all school members. Principals are required to possess adequate digital competencies to effectively lead the technological transformation process. Digital literacy encompasses not only the ability to use technological devices but also the ability to think critically about information, maintain data security (digital security), implement digital ethics (digital ethics), and utilize technology to support evidence-based decision-making. Schools with high levels of digital literacy tend to be better prepared for change, develop learning innovations more quickly, and are able to improve the efficiency of educational governance without neglecting humanitarian values (Setiawan & Lestari, 2025; Kurniawan & Lazwardi, 2025; Riyanto, 2026).

Research findings also indicate that the use of digital technology in school management systems is a strategic factor in increasing the effectiveness of educational organizations. Digitizing school administration enables faster, more accurate, and more transparent planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of programs. The use of school performance dashboards, academic supervision applications, school management information systems, and educational data analysis assists principals in formulating more objective policies based on the school's real needs. Thus, digital transformation is not simply a modernization of work tools, but rather a shift in management paradigm toward responsive, efficient, and accountable educational governance (Raprap et al., 2026; Riyanto, 2026).

However, the literature synthesis also confirms that the success of digital transformation depends heavily on strengthening the ethical dimension of leadership. Rapidly evolving technology has the potential to give rise to various problems, such as misuse of digital media, privacy violations, data manipulation, the dissemination of invalid information, and even a decline in the quality of social interactions among school members. Therefore, school principals must be able to exemplify digital ethics through the principles of honesty, transparency, accountability, responsibility, and respect for the rights of all school members. Ethics-based leadership serves as a control mechanism to ensure that digitalization remains oriented toward the benefit of education and does not shift to merely technological efficiency (Yufriyani et al., 2026; Hasan & Rahmi, 2025).

Another strategy that significantly contributes to improving educational quality is the development of transformational and visionary leadership. Visionary principals are able to understand changes in the strategic environment and set a direction for school development that aligns with future needs. Meanwhile, transformational leadership serves to build intrinsic teacher motivation, increase organizational commitment, and encourage educational innovation. The integration of these two leadership models has been proven to accelerate school organizational transformation, as each change is understood not merely as an administrative policy but as a collective movement of the entire school community toward a sustainable culture of quality (Mulyadi, 2025; Hermansyah et al., 2026; Dahliani et al., 2025).

Beyond leadership aspects, strengthening educational quality also requires systematic development of educational human resources. Principals must be able to design teacher competency improvement programs through training, coaching, mentoring, lesson study, learning communities, and professional collaboration between schools. Investment in teacher competency development is one indicator of a school's success in building competitive advantage in the digital era. Teachers with strong professional, pedagogical, social, and digital competencies will more easily develop innovative, student-centered learning, thus directly impacting the quality of learning outcomes (Norjanah et al., 2025;

Rahmi et al., 2023).

Furthermore, various studies have shown that collaboration with stakeholders is an increasingly important strategy for strengthening educational quality. Principals cannot work individually; they must build partnerships with parents, school committees, local governments, businesses, universities, and the community. This collaboration enables schools to obtain resource support, strengthen character education programs, improve digital literacy, and expand educational innovation networks. Schools with strong collaborative networks tend to be more adaptive to change and able to sustainably maintain the quality of educational services (Jahudin et al., 2025; Fathullah & Padliator, 2026).

Based on the overall analysis, a conceptual model can be developed that demonstrates that strategies for strengthening educational quality in junior high schools in the digital era rely on five main pillars: (1) ethics-based leadership, (2) humanistic digital transformation, (3) a culture of sustainable quality, (4) teacher professional development, and (5) multi-stakeholder collaboration. These five pillars are interconnected and form an integrated system to create schools that are adaptive, innovative, and oriented toward continuously improving educational quality. Thus, the success of schools in the digital era is not only determined by the sophistication of the technology they have, but is more determined by the quality of the principal's leadership in managing change based on ethical values, professionalism, and moral responsibility towards all school residents (Raprap et al., 2025; Warta et al., 2026; Yazidah et al.).

4. Implications for Junior High School Management

The results of a synthesis of various literature indicate that ethics-based educational leadership has far-reaching implications for junior high school governance in the digital era. School management is no longer solely focused on educational administration, but must also be directed toward creating a learning organization that is adaptive to technological developments, responsive to policy changes, and committed to continuous quality improvement. In this context, principals are required to integrate leadership, managerial, digital, and ethical competencies so that all school management processes are effective, transparent, accountable, and oriented toward quality educational services. Thus, ethics-based leadership is the primary foundation for building professional and humane school governance amidst the rapid flow of digital transformation (Raprap et al., 2026; Hasan & Rahmi, 2025).

The first implication relates to the shift in the principal's leadership paradigm. Principals are no longer positioned as administrators who merely perform administrative oversight functions, but rather as instructional leaders, transformational leaders, and digital leaders. This paradigm shift requires principals to be able to understand changes in the educational environment, develop a strategic school vision, manage innovation, and build an organizational culture that adapts to technological developments. Furthermore, all decisions made must remain grounded in ethical principles such as honesty, fairness, responsibility, transparency, and respect for the rights of all school members, so that digital transformation does not eliminate the human dimension of the educational process (Mulyadi, 2025; Hermansyah et al., 2026; Dahliani et al., 2025).

The second implication is the strengthening of data-driven school management. The digital era offers various technological tools that enable principals to quickly and accurately obtain data on teacher attendance, student learning outcomes, educational staff performance, the effectiveness of school programs, and even community satisfaction with educational services. This information forms the basis for evidence-based decision-making, so that school policies are no longer based solely on intuition but on objective data analysis. Data-driven school management also increases transparency and accountability because each program can be evaluated measurably and continuously. However, data utilization

must still adhere to ethical principles, particularly privacy protection, information security, and responsible data use (Raprap et al., 2026; Riyanto, 2026; Setiawan & Lestari, 2025).

The next implication is strengthening a quality culture as the school's organizational culture. Studies show that a school's success in improving educational quality is greatly influenced by the principal's ability to build a quality culture that involves the entire school community. A quality culture is not only manifested through the preparation of quality assurance documents or the fulfillment of accreditation indicators, but is also reflected in habits of reflection, self-evaluation, learning innovation, professional collaboration, and a commitment to continuous improvement. In this context, the principal serves as a role model capable of fostering intrinsic motivation among teachers and education personnel to continuously improve the quality of educational services without relying on external oversight. Therefore, a quality culture must be understood as part of a school's work culture, built through ethical and participatory leadership (Warta et al., 2026; Badrun & Siswoyo, 2025).

Another crucial implication is strengthening teacher professionalism through instructional leadership. Principals are required to create an environment that supports the continuous improvement of teacher competencies through academic supervision, needs-based training, teacher learning communities, coaching, mentoring, and the use of digital technology for professional development. This approach enables teachers not only to improve their pedagogical and professional competencies but also to develop digital literacy and the ability to integrate technology into the learning process. Thus, principal leadership not only impacts the quality of school management but also directly improves the quality of classroom learning, a key indicator of educational quality (Rahmi et al., 2023; Dewi, 2025; Norjanah et al., 2025).

On the other hand, the development of digital technology has implications for strengthening digital ethics within the school environment. Principals are responsible for ensuring that all members of the school community are able to use technology wisely, responsibly, and in accordance with educational values. This includes developing policies for digital media use, protecting students' personal data, preventing cyberbullying, strengthening information literacy, and establishing a culture of polite and integrated digital communication. The implementation of digital ethics is increasingly important given that junior high school students are an age group that is highly active in using social media, making them vulnerable to technology misuse if they do not receive adequate guidance. Therefore, ethics-based leadership must be realized through policies that balance digital innovation with student character development (Azizah et al., 2025; Yufriyani et al., 2026).

Another implication relates to strengthening multi-stakeholder collaboration (collaborative governance) in school management. Educational transformation in the digital era cannot be implemented solely by principals and teachers but requires synergy with parents, school committees, local governments, universities, businesses, community organizations, and local communities. Collaborative leadership will expand access to resources, strengthen learning innovation, increase support for school programs, and create an educational ecosystem that is more adaptive to change. This collaboration also strengthens public accountability by providing greater opportunity for community participation in improving school quality. Therefore, school principals need to build partnership networks based on the principles of mutual trust, open communication, and shared responsibility for improving educational quality (Jahudin et al., 2025; Fathullah & Padliator, 2026).

Furthermore, the study results indicate that another strategic implication is strengthening the digital-based internal quality assurance system (SPMI). School principals

need to integrate information technology into the entire quality assurance cycle, including quality mapping, program planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and follow-up. A digital system enables this entire process to be more effective, well-documented, and easily accessible as a basis for decision-making. However, the effectiveness of SPMI remains largely determined by the quality of the principal's leadership in fostering a commitment from all school members to a culture of evaluation and continuous improvement. This means that technology serves only as an instrument, while its successful implementation depends on leadership with integrity and a strong quality orientation (Raprap et al., 2026; Warta et al., 2026; Badrun & Siswoyo, 2025).

Based on the overall discussion, it is clear that the implications of ethics-based educational leadership for junior high school management are not limited to managerial aspects, but also encompass changes in organizational culture, strengthening human resource capacity, optimizing the use of digital technology, and developing a sustainable quality assurance system. Ideally, a school management model in the digital era is built through the integration of ethical leadership, visionary leadership, transformational leadership, digital leadership, and a culture of quality, resulting in schools that not only excel in academic achievement but also shape student character, enhance teacher professionalism, strengthen public trust, and maintain the sustainability of educational quality amidst the dynamics of global change. Thus, ethics-based leadership becomes a strategic element that determines the success of managing junior high schools as adaptive, innovative, integrated, and competitive educational organizations in the digital era (Raprap et al., 2025; Hasan & Rahmi, 2025; Yazidah et al.).

5. Ethics-Based Leadership as the Foundation of School Quality

A review of various literature shows that ethics-based leadership is the primary foundation for building quality, adaptive, and sustainable schools in the digital age. Educational quality is not solely determined by the adequacy of infrastructure, technological sophistication, or academic achievement, but is also strongly influenced by the quality of the principal's leadership in internalizing moral values throughout the educational process. Principals who base their leadership on ethics will be able to create school governance oriented toward honesty, responsibility, fairness, transparency, and respect for the dignity of every member of the school community. These values serve as social capital that strengthens trust, increases organizational commitment, and builds a work culture conducive to the continuous improvement of educational quality (Hasan & Rahmi, 2025; Yufriyani et al., 2026).

From a modern educational management perspective, ethical leadership is understood not merely as a set of individual behavioral norms, but as a framework that influences the planning process, decision-making, program implementation, and evaluation of school policies. A principal who implements ethics-based leadership will consider every policy based on the principles of benefit, justice, and prioritizing the interests of students. Therefore, all decisions made are not solely aimed at meeting administrative targets or bureaucratic demands, but are directed toward creating a healthy, inclusive, and safe educational environment that optimally supports both student academic and character development. This approach demonstrates that ethics is a strategic dimension determining the quality of school governance amidst the complex changes of the digital era (Raprap et al., 2025; Jahudin et al., 2025).

Digital transformation has brought about rapid changes in school management systems. The digitization of administration, technology-based learning, the use of artificial intelligence, and the utilization of educational data have increased the effectiveness and efficiency of education delivery. However, these developments have also given rise to various ethical issues, such as student data security, misuse of digital media, low

information literacy, copyright infringement, and a decline in the quality of social interactions within the school environment. These conditions demonstrate that digital transformation requires leadership that possesses not only technological competence but also moral integrity capable of directing the use of technology in accordance with educational values. Therefore, ethics-based leadership serves as a moral compass, ensuring that all digital innovations remain oriented toward student well-being and improving school quality (Kurniawan & Lazwardi, 2025; Setiawan & Lestari, 2025; Riyanto, 2026).

The synthesis of various studies also shows that principals who implement ethics-based leadership tend to be more successful in building a positive organizational culture. An organizational culture based on the values of trust, openness, collaboration, discipline, and responsibility will increase teacher motivation and strengthen the loyalty of all school members to the institution's vision and mission. Conversely, leadership that ignores ethical aspects often gives rise to internal conflict, low teacher participation, weak organizational communication, and decreased public trust in the school. A healthy school culture is essentially a reflection of the quality of the principal's leadership in implementing ethical values into daily organizational life (Norjanah et al., 2025; Hasan & Rahmi, 2025).

Another important aspect found in this study is the close relationship between ethics-based leadership and transformational leadership. An ethical principal not only provides direction but also serves as a role model in implementing the values of professionalism, integrity, and responsibility. This exemplary behavior can build teachers' intrinsic motivation to continuously improve their competencies, create learning innovations, and actively participate in school development. Transformational leadership based on ethics also encourages harmonious interpersonal relationships, so that organizational change is not viewed as a burden, but rather as an opportunity to improve the quality of educational services. Therefore, ethics becomes the spirit that animates transformational leadership practices in creating superior and adaptive schools (Dahlani et al., 2025; Hermansyah et al., 2026).

Furthermore, the analysis shows that ethics-based leadership has a significant influence on strengthening a quality culture in schools. A quality culture cannot develop solely through the development of operational standards or the implementation of accreditation; it must be built through the example of leaders who consistently apply the values of integrity, discipline, accountability, and a commitment to continuous improvement. An ethical principal will use evaluation as a tool for organizational learning, not as an instrument for finding fault. This approach encourages teachers and education staff to be more open to criticism, more actively engage in reflection, and have a strong commitment to improving the quality of learning. Therefore, a culture of quality develops as a collective consciousness, not simply an administrative obligation (Warta et al., 2026; Badrun & Siswoyo, 2025).

In addition to strengthening a culture of quality, ethics-based leadership also has implications for improving the quality of academic supervision. Studies show that supervision based on the principles of fairness, dialogue, respect for teacher professionalism, and providing constructive feedback can significantly increase learning effectiveness. Principals are no longer viewed as supervisors looking for teacher weaknesses, but rather as learning facilitators who help teachers develop pedagogical, professional, social, and digital competencies. Ethically based supervision creates a partnership of mutual respect, making the teacher development process more effective and impacting the quality of classroom learning (Rahmi et al., 2023; Dewi, 2025).

In the context of human resource management, ethics-based leadership encourages the creation of a fair, transparent, and professional development system oriented toward improving teacher capacity. Principals provide equal opportunities for all teachers to

participate in training, professional development activities, classroom action research, and various other competency-building programs. Policies based on the principle of fairness can increase teacher job satisfaction, loyalty, and motivation, thus positively impacting the quality of educational services. Conversely, discriminatory or non-transparent leadership practices have the potential to create organizational conflict, ultimately hindering efforts to improve school quality (Norjanah et al., 2025; Raprap et al., 2026).

The results also indicate that a principal's success in implementing ethics-based leadership strengthens public trust in the school. The community tends to provide greater support to schools led professionally, transparently, and accountably. This trust is reflected in increased parental participation, school committee support, partnerships with various institutions, and community involvement in various educational programs. This social capital is a crucial asset in improving educational quality because it enables schools to obtain support from resources, innovation, and broader collaborative networks. Therefore, ethical leadership not only impacts the internal environment of schools but also strengthens the social legitimacy of educational institutions in the eyes of the public (Jahudin et al., 2025; Fathullah & Padlianor, 2026).

Based on the overall results of the literature synthesis, it can be formulated that ethics-based leadership is a strategic foundation in building school quality in the digital era. Leadership based on the values of integrity, honesty, responsibility, fairness, caring, and professionalism can strengthen organizational culture, improve the quality of learning, optimize the quality assurance system, strengthen humanistic digital transformation, and increase public trust in schools. Therefore, the quality of education is not solely the result of technological modernization or managerial success, but rather a manifestation of the quality of the principal's leadership in integrating the dimensions of ethics, vision, innovation, and commitment to continuous improvement. This leadership model is the main prerequisite for the realization of a junior high school that is superior, character-based, adaptive, and able to answer the challenges of education in the digital era (Raprap et al., 2025; Hasan & Rahmi, 2025; Yufriyani et al., 2026; Warta et al., 2026).

Conclusion

Based on the study's findings, it can be concluded that digital transformation has brought about a fundamental shift in the paradigm of educational leadership at the junior high school (SMP) level, moving from a leadership focus primarily on administrative aspects to one that is adaptive, visionary, collaborative, and grounded in ethical values. This shift requires principals not only to master digital technology but also to possess the competency to strategically manage organizational change, build a positive school culture, strengthen digital literacy across the school community, maintain professionalism and professional ethics, and ensure that implemented innovations remain oriented toward improving educational quality. Therefore, the success of digital transformation is not solely determined by the sophistication of the technology used, but rather by the quality of leadership that integrates moral, social, and pedagogical aspects into every decision-making process.

Furthermore, ethics-based educational leadership is the most relevant approach to addressing the challenges of education in the digital era because it balances the demands of innovation with human values. This leadership is not only directed at achieving performance indicators, organizational effectiveness, and efficiency of school management, but also ensures that the entire educational transformation process remains grounded in the essential goals of education, namely to shape students with character, integrity, critical thinking skills, creativity, collaboration, and communication, and the ability to adapt to developments in science and technology. Therefore, strengthening the leadership capacity

of school principals based on ethics needs to be a priority in educational development policies, especially at the junior high school level. These efforts are expected to produce schools that are adaptive to change, innovative in learning management, superior in quality assurance, and continue to uphold moral values and professionalism, thus realizing quality, competitive, and dignified education amidst the dynamics of the digital era.

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