

STRENGTHENING LEADERSHIP CHARACTER THROUGH THE “CAPTAIN FOR A DAY” PROGRAM FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Low student participation and the dominance of teacher-centered learning constitute the main background of this study, as they contribute to the underdevelopment of leadership among elementary school students. This condition indicates the need for experience-based learning strategies that provide opportunities for students to actively participate in classroom activities. The purpose of this study is to describe the implementation of the “Kapten Sehari” (Captain for a Day) Program in fostering leadership among elementary school students in the Gajah Mada Cluster, Cipari District, Cilacap Regency, to analyze the teacher’s role in guiding and facilitating the program implementation, and to examine its impact on the development of students’ leadership. This research employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design. The data consist of primary and secondary sources, including the school principal, fifth-grade teachers, and fifth-grade students involved in the program. Data collection techniques include observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Data validity is ensured through source triangulation and technique triangulation. Data analysis follows the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing, and is further strengthened by thematic analysis. The findings reveal that the “Kapten Sehari” Program is implemented through a daily rotation system that provides all students with the opportunity to act as class leaders. The captain’s activities include leading prayers, organizing lines, taking attendance, and reminding classmates of their responsibilities. The implementation of the program provides direct learning experiences that enhance students’ courage, self-confidence, responsibility, independence, and social skills. The teacher’s role as a facilitator, mentor, and evaluator, along with the principal’s policy support, are key factors in the success of the program and in strengthening a character-based school culture.

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INTRODUCTION

Strengthening leadership character holds a strategic position in the transformation of primary education as part of character education implementation. Leadership includes students' ability to make decisions, take responsibility, and show initiative in various learning situations. Elementary school students need this competence as a foundation for developing self-confidence, social skills, and readiness to face life challenges. The development of students' leadership can be carried out through experiential learning activities and continuous habituation (Romadhan & Sumitro, 2025; Denansa et al., 2023).

In the national educational context, character education positions leadership as an essential element in shaping the holistic profile of learners. The implementation of these values cannot rely solely on conceptual learning, but requires real experiences that allow students to practice directly in social situations. Various studies show that practice-based activities such as scouting, entrepreneurship projects, and daily habituation are more effective in shaping students' character compared to conventional approaches (Amalia et al., 2025; Theresia et al., 2022). This highlights the importance of designing learning that provides space for active student participation in developing leadership potential.

However, classroom learning practices still tend to be teacher-centered with limited student involvement. Teachers act as the main actors in managing learning, while students tend to be passive recipients of information. This condition limits students' opportunities to develop initiative, responsibility, and leadership skills in learning activities. Research indicates that low student participation negatively affects learning independence and self-confidence (Juraidah & Hartoyo, 2022). This phenomenon shows a gap between the goals of character education and its classroom implementation.

The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes experiential learning that encourages active student engagement in the learning process. Its implementation provides opportunities for schools to develop various habituation programs that support character building. Studies show that contextual learning within the Merdeka Curriculum can enhance students' independence and responsibility (Prasanti & Apriani, 2025; Suwarni, 2024). However, its implementation in practice still tends to focus on learning outcomes, so character formation through direct experience has not been fully optimized.

Empirical conditions in the Gajah Mada Cluster, Cipari District, Cilacap Regency, indicate that students' leadership character has not developed optimally. Preliminary observations of Phase C students show that most students still depend on teacher guidance in managing classroom activities. Group learning activities are dominated by a few confident students, while others tend to be passive and less initiative. Classroom responsibility management such as cleanliness and order is also still largely directed by teacher instructions. Interviews with fifth-grade teachers confirm that students are not yet accustomed to taking independent leadership roles, and leadership habituation programs have not been consistently implemented.

The "Captain for a Day" program, as a form of experiential learning, offers an alternative to address this gap. This program provides students with opportunities to take turns performing leadership roles in managing classroom activities, such as organizing learning activities, maintaining discipline, and making simple decisions. Role-based learning has been shown to enhance student leadership because it provides real experiences in learning situations (Norjannah et al., 2025; Rahmawati et al., 2025). This program has potential as a contextual strategy to strengthen student character in elementary schools, particularly in the Gajah Mada Cluster, Cipari District, Cilacap Regency.

The development of primary education research shows increasing attention to character- and experience-based learning in improving students' personal qualities. Previous studies indicate that habituation programs can improve students' independence, discipline, and responsibility (Arrahmi et al., 2025; Asabe et al., 2025). Value-based leadership approaches also contribute to holistic character development (Ansori et al., 2024; Navita et al., 2025). However, most studies focus on character outcomes without deeply examining the implementation process within classroom learning contexts. This limitation indicates a research gap in the procedural aspect of students' leadership formation.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on analyzing the implementation of the “Captain for a Day” program, emphasizing the dimensions of process, activities, and dynamics of students’ leadership development in classroom settings within the local context of the Gajah Mada Cluster, Cipari District, Cilacap Regency. In contrast to previous studies that are predominantly outcome-oriented, this study highlights how students’ direct experiences in leadership roles are shaped through classroom interactions, real practices, and the teacher’s role as a facilitator.

This study aims to describe the implementation of the “Captain for a Day” program, analyze the role of teachers in guiding and facilitating the program, and examine its impact on the development of elementary school students’ leadership character. The findings are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically to the development of contextual and applicable experience-based character education

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to understand the meaning of teachers’ and students’ experiences in implementing the “Captain for a Day” Program in the Gajah Mada Cluster, Cipari District, Cilacap Regency, Central Java. This approach focuses on exploring the subjective meanings of students’ leadership development experiences rather than institutional structural aspects. The research site was selected purposively because schools in this cluster have implemented the Captain for a Day program. The research subjects consisted of the principal, fifth-grade teachers, and fifth-grade students directly involved in the program implementation.

The research data consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews and observations of principals, teachers, and students during the implementation of the Captain for a Day Program. Secondary data were collected from supporting documents such as program guidelines, standard operating procedures (SOP), lesson plans (RPP), captain rotation schedules, teacher notes, and activity documentation. Data collection techniques included observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation to obtain a comprehensive overview of the program’s implementation in fostering leadership among elementary school students.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles et al., 2018). The analysis was further strengthened using thematic analysis to identify key themes such as leadership, independence, responsibility, and self-confidence. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation and technique triangulation by comparing interview results, observations, and documentation to ensure high credibility and scientific accountability of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Implementation of the “Captain for a Day” Program in Fostering Students’ Leadership Character

The implementation of the “Captain for a Day” program in the Gajah Mada Cluster Elementary Schools, Cipari District, Cilacap Regency, uses a daily rotation system that provides each student with the opportunity to become a class leader. The program is designed to give students direct experience in performing leadership roles within the school environment. The activities performed by the “Captain for a Day” include leading prayers, organizing class lines, taking attendance, and reminding classmates about cleaning duties. Each student is given equal opportunity to perform these roles in rotation. This activity structure aims to build responsibility and courage in real-life contexts.

The implementation begins every morning before learning activities through classroom habituation. The teacher provides brief instructions to the student assigned as captain so that they understand their responsibilities. Students are then given the opportunity to lead prayers and organize classroom readiness according to instructions. Observation results show that students are able to perform basic leadership tasks, although some still appear nervous. This indicates that the process of leadership learning occurs gradually through direct experience.

Observations also show that students’ ability to lead prayers has begun to develop. Their voices are not yet fully confident, but their willingness to speak in front of the class is evident. In organizing class lines, students demonstrate the ability to direct their peers in a polite manner. Attendance-taking is carried out quite carefully,

although students still require guidance in recording procedures. Field notes indicate that students are beginning to show concern for classroom cleanliness by reminding peers about cleaning duties.

Student interviews reinforce the observational findings regarding leadership experiences. Student HA stated, "I have been a Captain for a Day twice. When I became captain, I led the prayer, organized my friends, and helped the teacher. I felt happy but also a bit nervous." This statement indicates the presence of emotional experiences during the learning process. The feeling of nervousness reflects initial challenges in performing a new role, while still providing meaningful learning experiences.

Positive behavioral changes were also observed after students participated in the program. Student SA stated, "After becoming a captain, I became braver. Now I often help my friends." This indicates increased confidence and social awareness following leadership experience. Such changes reflect the impact of direct experience on students' character development, as social interaction becomes more active after taking leadership roles.

Different conditions were found among students who still showed low self-confidence. Student KB stated, "I once became a captain. I only led the prayer. I felt afraid and embarrassed." This reflects psychological barriers in performing leadership tasks. It indicates the need for more intensive teacher support to help students overcome fear and embarrassment.

School support strengthens the implementation of the "Captain for a Day" program through structured policies and facilitation. The principal stated, "The 'Captain for a Day' program was created because the school wants to provide students with direct leadership experience." This indicates that the program is designed as part of character strengthening. The school's vision emphasizes the formation of independent, responsible, and well-characterized students, serving as the foundation for program implementation.

Overall, the implementation of the "Captain for a Day" program shows that leadership learning occurs through real classroom experiences. The rotation system provides equal opportunities for all students to learn leadership. Daily habituation gradually shapes students' character through direct practice. Interaction between teachers and students creates a learning environment that supports leadership development. This program contributes significantly to the contextual and sustainable development of leadership character in elementary school students.

The Role of Teachers in Guiding and Facilitating the "Captain for a Day" Program

The teacher's role in implementing the "Captain for a Day" program in the Gajah Mada Cluster Elementary Schools is evident in the lesson planning stage. Teachers design a student rotation system so that every student has the opportunity to become a captain. This planning includes scheduling, task assignment, and explaining the captain's role to students. The tasks include leading prayers, organizing class lines, taking attendance, and reminding cleaning duties. This structure ensures equal student participation in leadership activities.

During implementation, teachers provide direct assistance while students perform their captain duties. Teachers give brief instructions before activities begin to ensure students understand their tasks. Students are then guided step by step in leading prayers, organizing the class, and completing other duties. Observations show that teachers remain as facilitators when students experience difficulties, indicating active guidance during implementation.

Teacher scaffolding strategies include modeling before students perform leadership tasks. Teachers demonstrate how to lead prayers, organize lines, and take attendance. Less confident students receive more intensive guidance. Teachers also provide encouragement to help students attempt tasks despite hesitation. Interviews indicate that this approach is used to gradually build student confidence.

A teacher stated, "I give motivation and praise to students after they become captains." This reflects positive reinforcement in the learning process. Feedback is used both to improve and strengthen student behavior, while reflection is conducted briefly after classroom activities.

Teachers also play a role in evaluating the program implementation through direct observation of student behavior. Aspects assessed include courage, responsibility, and the ability to manage peers. Evaluation results are used as considerations for the next rotation cycle. Although simple, this evaluation process is continuous in daily learning activities.

Support for less confident students is also evident in teacher encouragement. A student (KB) stated, “The teacher helps me slowly.” This shows gradual assistance in adapting to leadership roles. Teachers allow students to try even when they feel afraid, helping them adjust to classroom leadership responsibilities.

Teachers also create a supportive classroom environment that ensures equal participation. Each student is given a turn based on the rotation schedule. The classroom atmosphere is designed to be safe and comfortable so students feel confident when performing in front of peers. Teacher-student interaction is active throughout the process.

Overall, the teacher’s role in the “Captain for a Day” program includes being a facilitator, guide, and evaluator simultaneously. Teachers not only give instructions but also continuously support and motivate students. This approach creates a structured and meaningful learning experience. Teacher involvement is a key factor in ensuring the program runs effectively and sustainably.

Table 1. The Role of Teachers in the “Captain for a Day” Program

No	Aspect of Teacher Role	Form of Role
1	Planning	Designing rotation system and captain tasks
2	Guidance	Providing instructions during activities
3	Modeling	Demonstrating task implementation
4	Motivation	Giving praise and encouragement
5	Evaluation	Observing and assessing student behavior
6	Learning environment facilitation	Creating a safe and conducive classroom

Based on the table, it can be seen that the teacher’s role is not limited to instruction but also includes guidance, modeling, motivation, evaluation, and the creation of a conducive learning environment. These roles show that teachers function as key facilitators ensuring the effective and sustainable implementation of the “Captain for a Day” program in fostering students’ leadership character.

Impact of the “Captain for a Day” Program on Elementary School Students’ Leadership in the Gajah Mada Cluster, Cipari District, Cilacap Regency

The “Captain for a Day” program has an impact on the development of students’ courage in taking roles within the classroom. Students demonstrate increased ability to appear and speak in front of their peers. Activities such as leading prayers and organizing the class are carried out in rotation, creating opportunities for students to practice courage directly. Observable changes include students’ initiative in performing tasks without coercion.

Students’ leadership development is reflected in their ability to direct peers during classroom activities. Students begin to organize class lines in a more polite and structured manner. Attendance activities are performed more carefully after several experiences as class captain. These activities indicate increased responsibility in carrying out daily tasks. Observation notes show that students are beginning to understand their role as classroom leaders.

Positive changes in self-confidence are observed among most students after participating in the program. Students become more willing to speak in front of the class, although their voices are still not fully stable. Student HA stated, “I am now more confident speaking in front of the class.” This indicates an increase in self-confidence after experiencing leadership roles. This reflects students’ psychological development in the elementary school learning context.

Positive behavioral changes are also evident in students’ independence in classroom activities. Students begin to complete tasks without constant teacher direction. Activities such as tidying the classroom and reminding peers are carried out more actively. Student SA stated, “After becoming a captain, I became braver. I now often help my friends.” This reflects a shift toward social independence.

Leadership development is also evident in students’ ability to collaborate with peers. Students begin to understand the importance of order in classroom activities. Peer interaction becomes more organized during captain activities. Students who have served as captain tend to be more sensitive to classroom conditions. This indicates a process of social learning through direct experience.

Different conditions are found among students who still experience fear and embarrassment. Student KB stated, “I feel afraid and embarrassed.” This shows that not all students experience development at the same rate. Some students still require time to adapt to leadership roles, indicating variation in individual developmental readiness.

The program also increases students’ overall engagement in classroom activities. Students become more responsive to instructions and tasks. The captain experience helps students understand responsibility directly. These activities gradually build positive classroom habits, indicating internalization of leadership values over time.

Overall, the “Captain for a Day” program demonstrates the development of students’ leadership through real classroom experiences. Changes are observed in courage, responsibility, independence, and social interaction. The program provides a learning space that enables students to learn from direct experience, with development occurring gradually according to opportunities provided. These findings indicate that the program contributes to the formation of elementary students’ leadership character

Table 2. Impact of the “Captain for a Day” Program on Students’ Leadership

No	Impact	Description
1	Increased courage	Students become more willing to appear in front of the class to lead prayers, organize peers, and speak, although initial nervousness is still present.
2	Increased responsibility	Students demonstrate seriousness in performing captain tasks such as attendance, maintaining order, and reminding cleaning duties in a more structured way.
3	Increased self-confidence	Students show improved confidence after experiencing classroom leadership through a daily rotation system.
4	Increased independence	Students begin to complete classroom tasks without constant teacher direction, such as cleaning and reminding peers independently.
5	Improved social skills	Students interact more actively with peers and are able to cooperate in maintaining classroom order.
6	Variation in development	Some students still show fear and embarrassment in performing leadership roles and require further guidance.

The table shows that the impact of the “Captain for a Day” program is not limited to a single dimension but extends across multiple aspects of student leadership development. Each dimension of impact emerges through direct and repeated experience during students’ roles as classroom captains. Leadership learning appears in concrete classroom situations where students are required to take responsibility and make simple decisions. Differences in developmental levels are clearly observable among students depending on their confidence and readiness. These findings indicate that leadership formation occurs gradually through structured and meaningful classroom practice.

The implementation of the “Captain for a Day” program in the Gajah Mada Cluster Elementary Schools demonstrates that students’ leadership development is shaped through direct classroom experience. This finding aligns with Romadhan and Sumitro (2025) and Denansa et al. (2023), who emphasize that experiential and habituation-based learning strengthens character development more effectively than conceptual instruction alone. The rotation system ensures that every student participates actively in leadership roles, allowing internalization of values through practice rather than theory. Character development becomes more meaningful when students are directly involved in real tasks that require responsibility and initiative. Andriani and Wakhudin (2020) further support this condition by stating that discovery learning strengthens character internalization through active student engagement.

The implementation of leadership roles such as leading prayers, organizing the class, and taking attendance demonstrates that students are engaged in simple but meaningful leadership activities. These tasks provide structured opportunities for students to practice responsibility in real classroom contexts. Similar findings are reported by Amalia et al. (2025) and Sami & Purnomo (2024), who highlight that role-based learning activities enhance student participation and responsibility. Classroom leadership activities also allow students to experience decision-making in small but significant forms. Functional leadership skills begin to emerge through these consistent and contextual learning experiences.

Students' increased courage in speaking in front of the class reflects the development of self-confidence through repeated leadership exposure. Classroom experiences as captains encourage students to overcome fear and hesitation gradually. Navita et al. (2025) and Ansori et al. (2024) emphasize that value-based leadership development requires continuous reinforcement through real experiences. Students who were initially passive begin to show willingness to speak and lead group activities. Confidence develops progressively as students repeatedly engage in leadership roles.

Behavioral changes in students' independence further strengthen the findings of this study. Students begin to complete classroom responsibilities without constant teacher direction after several experiences as captains. Classroom tasks such as cleaning, organizing materials, and reminding peers are performed more actively and voluntarily. Prasanti and Apriani (2025) and Arrahmi et al. (2025) explain that contextual and habituation-based learning improves student independence significantly. Differentiated learning approaches also contribute to meaningful and enjoyable learning experiences that support independence development, as stated by Anggoro et al. (2024).

The role of the principal in supporting character-building programs plays a crucial role in ensuring program sustainability. School leadership establishes policies that integrate the "Captain for a Day" program into school culture. Institutional commitment ensures that leadership development becomes part of daily learning practices. Putri and Kalstum (2022) and Botutihe et al. (2023) highlight that strong school leadership is essential in creating an ecosystem that supports character education. Sustainable implementation depends on consistent institutional direction and support.

Leadership development is also strengthened through extracurricular and school-wide activities that reinforce character values. Tangahu and Muda (2020) state that extracurricular religious activities contribute to the development of discipline, responsibility, and leadership. Similar principles are applied in the "Captain for a Day" program through daily classroom habituation. Repeated exposure to leadership tasks strengthens students' character formation gradually. Classroom-based habituation serves as a continuous medium for experiential learning.

Student independence is also influenced by practical learning experiences that require active involvement. Pramesti et al. (2020) emphasize that entrepreneurship-based learning fosters independence through real decision-making experiences. The captain program provides similar opportunities where students manage classroom responsibilities directly. Decision-making experiences in simple classroom contexts contribute to the development of autonomy. Independence grows through consistent engagement in meaningful tasks.

Supportive school environments contribute significantly to students' emotional and social development. Transformational leadership in education creates a positive climate that encourages student participation and confidence, as highlighted by Suharningsih and Sumardjoko (2025). Teachers play a dual role as instructors and facilitators in guiding leadership development. Safe and supportive classroom environments encourage students to experiment with leadership roles without fear. Emotional support from teachers strengthens students' willingness to participate actively.

Teacher involvement remains a critical factor in the success of the program. Teachers provide structured guidance, role modeling, and continuous motivation throughout the implementation process. Active teacher participation ensures that students understand their roles and responsibilities clearly. Juraidah and Hartoyo (2022) and Mas & Zulystiawati (2022) emphasize that teacher facilitation is essential in fostering active student engagement. Learning through experience becomes more effective when supported by consistent teacher guidance.

Variations in student development indicate that leadership growth does not occur uniformly among all learners. Some students show rapid improvement, while others require more time and support to adapt. Psychological readiness and environmental factors influence the pace of leadership development. Suharningsih and Sumardjoko (2025) explain that individual differences affect character formation processes. Continuous guidance is necessary to support students who experience difficulty in adapting to leadership roles.

The improvement in social interaction further strengthens the overall findings of this study. Students demonstrate better communication, cooperation, and classroom engagement after participating in the program. Daily leadership experiences encourage students to interact more actively with peers. Yuniati and Sukartono (2026) and

Boushey & Moser (2023) highlight that activity-based learning improves social competence and leadership skills. Classroom interaction becomes more structured and collaborative as students gain experience.

Overall, the “Captain for a Day” program demonstrates that leadership formation occurs through real experience, habituation, and continuous social interaction. Character development becomes more effective when students are directly involved in meaningful classroom roles. School culture and curriculum implementation contribute significantly to shaping holistic student character, as stated by Anisah (2023) and Suwarni (2024). Role-based learning provides contextual, gradual, and sustainable opportunities for leadership development. Elementary students develop leadership character through consistent engagement in authentic classroom experiences.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the “Captain for a Day” Program in the Gajah Mada Cluster Elementary Schools, Cipari District, Cilacap Regency is carried out through a daily rotation system that provides all students with equal opportunities to perform leadership roles in the classroom. The captain’s activities include leading prayers, organizing class lines, taking attendance, and reminding classmates of cleaning duties, which are conducted in rotation. The program is implemented through daily habituation with teacher assistance as facilitators who provide guidance, modeling, and motivation. Students demonstrate development in several aspects, including increased courage to speak in front of the class, responsibility in completing assigned tasks, independence in classroom activities, and improved social interaction with peers. Collaboration between teachers, students, and school policy serves as the main supporting factor in the sustainability of the program.

Teachers are recommended to strengthen mentoring strategies through a more personalized approach for students who still lack confidence, so that all students can actively participate in leadership roles. Schools are encouraged to develop variations of activities within the “Captain for a Day” Program to broaden students’ leadership experiences beyond routine classroom tasks. Future research is recommended to adopt quantitative or mixed-method approaches to obtain more measurable data on students’ leadership development. Further studies may also expand the focus to include family and social environmental factors to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the program’s effectiveness.

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