



Transformational Leadership of the Madrasah Principal in Building a Religious Culture at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah

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Abstract

The leadership of a madrasah principal plays an important role in determining the direction and character of Islamic educational institutions. In a Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, the principal not only serves as an administrator but also as a role model in cultivating religious values. This study aims to understand how the principal's transformational leadership is implemented in building a religious culture at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Fathul Huda Pucung, Tulungagung Regency. The research uses a qualitative case-study design, with data collected from the principal, teachers, educational staff, and students. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation, and were then analyzed descriptively to identify patterns and meanings in the leadership practices observed in the field. The results of the study show that the principal, Mrs. SK, applies transformational leadership through role modeling, inspirational communication, and empowering teachers and students in religious activities. Religious values in the madrasah develop through routine activities such as congregational prayers, Qur'an recitation, and the consistent practice of courteous behavior. Leadership that emphasizes exemplary conduct and a spirit of togetherness has proven effective in fostering a vibrant religious culture that is embraced by all members of the madrasah community. The study concludes that transformational leadership is the key to shaping an educational environment that excels not only academically but also possesses strong religious character and spiritual meaning.

Keywords: Transformational leadership, Madrasah principal, Religious culture.

Introduction

Educational leadership has become a central issue in global educational discourse as schools are increasingly expected to function not only as learning organizations but also as institutions responsible for shaping values, character, and ethical behavior. In faith-based education systems, leadership carries a more complex responsibility, requiring school leaders to integrate administrative competence with moral and spiritual guidance. This expectation positions school principals as key agents in cultivating institutional culture and ensuring that educational practices align with foundational values.

In Islamic education, madrasahs represent a distinctive educational context in which leadership is intrinsically linked to the internalization of religious values. The madrasah principal holds a strategic role not merely as an administrator but as a moral and spiritual leader who influences how Islamic values are interpreted, practiced, and sustained within the school environment. In this context, leadership is expected to guide the school community toward a shared vision rooted in Islamic teachings, particularly through fostering a religious culture that permeates daily school life (Fitri Wahyuni & Binti Maunah, 2021; Sugiri et al., 2022).

Transformational leadership has gained prominence in educational leadership studies due to its emphasis on vision-building, inspirational motivation, and value internalization. This leadership style enables principals to influence teachers and students through exemplary

conduct, relational engagement, and shared commitment rather than relying solely on authority. Research indicates that transformational leadership positively contributes to teacher commitment, organizational climate, and institutional sustainability (Argista Rahmaini, 2021; Murti & Sabarudin, 2023). In Islamic educational settings, transformational leadership is particularly relevant because it aligns leadership practices with moral integrity, spiritual awareness, and collective responsibility.

One of the most tangible outcomes of transformational leadership in madrasahs is the formation of religious culture. Religious culture reflects the embodiment of Islamic values in institutional routines, social interactions, and educational practices, including worship activities, discipline, work ethic, and interpersonal relationships. At the Madrasah Ibtidaiyah level, the development of religious culture is especially crucial, as elementary education constitutes a foundational stage for the internalization of values and character formation. A consistently nurtured religious culture provides a meaningful learning environment that supports students' moral and spiritual development (Sugiarto & Ahmad Farid, 2024).

Despite its importance, several studies indicate that many madrasahs encounter challenges in building and sustaining a strong religious culture. These challenges include limited leadership exemplarity, ineffective communication of religious values, and insufficient synergy between principals and teachers (Suliki et al., 2023; Turmuzi et al., 2024). Such conditions suggest that the presence of a principal who consistently exercises transformational leadership is a determining factor in the successful cultivation of religious culture within madrasahs.

Previous research on madrasah leadership has primarily examined managerial leadership, instructional supervision, and administrative effectiveness (NS et al., 2022; Syah, 2014). Although transformational leadership has been examined in relation to teacher performance and organizational climate, few studies have specifically explored how the transformational leadership of the madrasah principal functions as a cultural mechanism in building religious culture at the Madrasah Ibtidaiyah level. This gap is critical, as leadership at the elementary level plays a decisive role in shaping students' religious identity and long-term character development.

Therefore, this study focuses on the transformational leadership of the madrasah principal in building a religious culture at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah. Using a qualitative case study approach at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Fathul Huda Pucung, this research aims to analyze leadership practices that integrate transformational principles with the development of religious culture. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically to the enrichment of the value-based leadership discourse in Islamic education and, practically, to provide guidance for madrasah principals in strengthening religious culture through transformative leadership.

Literature review

Transformational leadership is widely recognized as a leadership approach that emphasizes vision development, inspirational motivation, exemplary behavior, and individualized consideration. In educational institutions, particularly schools, this leadership style enables principals to influence teachers and students by fostering shared commitment and moral responsibility rather than relying solely on formal authority. Research in educational leadership consistently shows that transformational leadership contributes to improved

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organizational climate, enhanced teacher commitment, and sustainable institutional development (Argista Rahmaini, 2021; Murti & Sabarudin, 2023).

In the context of Islamic education, the role of the madrasah principal extends beyond administrative responsibilities to include moral and spiritual leadership. Principals are expected to serve as role models who embody Islamic values and guide the school community toward a shared religious vision. Studies indicate that transformational leadership practiced by madrasah principals encourages religious awareness, spiritual enthusiasm, and collective engagement among teachers and students (Buchori et al., 2024; Husnah et al., 2024). However, much of the existing literature focuses on leadership outcomes, such as performance and motivation, rather than examining how transformational leadership functions as a cultural process within madrasahs.

Religious culture in madrasahs refers to the internalization and institutionalization of Islamic values within daily school life. This culture is manifested through worship practices, discipline, work ethics, interpersonal relationships, and social interactions among members of the school community. At the Madrasah Ibtidaiyah level, the development of religious culture is particularly crucial, as elementary education represents a foundational stage for shaping students' religious identity and moral character (Sugiarto & Ahmad Farid, 2024).

A strong religious culture fosters a meaningful learning environment and supports students' moral, emotional, and social development. However, several studies highlight persistent challenges in cultivating religious culture in madrasahs, including limited exemplar leadership, inconsistent communication of values, and weak collaboration between principals and teachers (Suliki et al., 2023; Turmuzi et al., 2024). These findings suggest that religious culture development requires sustained leadership commitment and coherent value integration across all aspects of school life.

Empirical studies increasingly acknowledge the relationship between leadership and organizational culture in educational institutions. Transformational leaders are considered more effective in embedding values into institutional practices because they promote shared vision, ethical consistency, and participatory engagement (Tajudin & Aprilianto, 2020). In madrasah contexts, research demonstrates that transformational leadership strengthens religious awareness and reinforces collective responsibility among school members (Efendy et al., 2022; Sulistio et al., 2024).

Despite growing interest in leadership and religious culture, existing studies predominantly focus on secondary-level madrasahs or examine leadership from managerial and supervisory perspectives (NS et al., 2022; Syah, 2014). Few studies explicitly investigate how the transformational leadership of madrasah principals contributes to the construction and sustainability of religious culture at the Madrasah Ibtidaiyah level. This limitation indicates a need for in-depth, context-sensitive research that positions the principal as a central agent in building religious culture through transformational leadership practices.

This study offers a novel contribution by conceptualizing the madrasah principal's transformational leadership not merely as an administrative or motivational approach, but as a cultural mechanism for constructing and sustaining religious culture at the Madrasah Ibtidaiyah level. Unlike previous studies that focus on leadership outcomes such as teacher performance or organizational climate, this research provides an in-depth analysis of leadership practices that integrate vision, exemplary behavior, and value internalization within daily school life. By situating leadership within the cultural and spiritual dimensions of Islamic elementary education, this study extends the existing body of knowledge on value-based educational leadership.

Research method

This study adopts a qualitative case-study approach to investigate the implementation of transformational leadership at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Fathul Huda Pucung, Tulungagung Regency. This approach was chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of how the principal, Mrs. SK, implements a transformational leadership style to foster a religious culture within the madrasah. Through this case study, the researcher was able to directly observe the situations and dynamics in the madrasah's daily life, rather than being limited to statistical data or written documentation. This aligns with the findings revealed by Argista, who used the case study method in her research on transformational leadership in madrasahs (Argista, 2021).

Madrasah Fathul Huda Pucung was selected as the research site because of the principal's evident efforts in instilling religious values among all members of the madrasah. Mrs. SK is known for her active involvement and strong enthusiasm in promoting a religious culture through various educational activities and daily interactions within the school. Therefore, this madrasah serves as a suitable representation for understanding the application of transformational leadership in Islamic education. Inderasari's research highlights the importance of madrasah principals applying transformational leadership styles to achieve management professionalism in madrasah contexts (Inderasari, 2021).

The data sources in this study included the principal, teachers, administrative staff, and several students, selected through purposive sampling. This method is consistent with Budiman's study, which used a qualitative case study approach to evaluate leadership styles in the management of facilities and infrastructure in madrasahs (Budiman, 2023). To gain a more comprehensive perspective, the researcher also conducted interviews with students' parents and community figures around the madrasah, helping to further explore the impact of leadership on the school's religious atmosphere.

Data were collected through three main methods: interviews, observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted to explore informants' experiences and perspectives on Mrs. SK's leadership style and its influence. Observation was conducted by attending various activities, including congregational prayers and Qur'an recitation. Documentation was used to collect written data on the school's vision and mission statements, as well as religious activities. This is in line with the study by Muzaat, which showed that using diverse data collection methods provides a more comprehensive picture of transformational leadership in education (Muzaat, 2025).

As the primary instrument, the researcher acted as both observer and data collector. Data verification was conducted through triangulation by comparing findings from interviews, observations, and documentation, as emphasized by Sariah, who noted that triangulation strengthens data validity in qualitative research (Sariah et al., 2024). Data were analyzed descriptively to identify patterns and meanings, and to explore significant relationships between transformational leadership and the development of religious culture at MI Fathul Huda Pucung. Through this method, the researcher aimed to draw relevant conclusions regarding the implementation of leadership in this madrasah ('Aziizah & Suwadi, 2021).

Results

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The results of this study indicate that the transformational leadership of the principal of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Fathul Huda Pucung, Mrs. SK, significantly influences the development of a religious culture within the madrasah. This finding is consistent with the study by Nasrullah, which emphasized that transformational leadership positively contributes to teachers' commitment and performance in madrasahs (Muhammad Nasrullah, 2021). In this study, the principal set a strong example through her active participation in daily religious activities, which added a positive dimension to the school's religious climate.

First, the exemplary conduct demonstrated by Mrs. SK, such as her consistent participation in congregational prayers and other religious activities, reflects the importance of leadership role modeling in developing a religious culture within the madrasah, as also highlighted by (Argista, 2021). Teachers and students regard her discipline and religiosity as motivating forces that inspire them to emulate similar behavior.

Second, effective communication between the principal and all members of the academic community strengthens the positive impact of transformational leadership. This aligns with Efendy et al., who emphasized the importance of communication in shaping students' religious character (Efendy et al., 2022). Every school activity begins with prayer, reflecting a collective commitment to uphold moral and religious values.

Furthermore, the existence of routine programs that include scheduled religious activities greatly supports the establishment of a strong religious culture. This finding is consistent with Muhtadi et al., who underscored the significance of religious activities in madrasahs for character building among students (Muhtadi et al., 2024). Activities such as congregational prayers and the habitual recitation of the Qur'an consistently demonstrate the principal's commitment to reinforcing religious values.

Documentation results also show that the integration of religious values into school policies highlights the importance of structural support for sustaining a religious culture. This is in line with research showing that transformational leadership can lay the foundation for a positive educational climate in madrasahs (Muadin, 2022).

Overall, the study findings reveal that the transformational leadership practiced by the principal has a significant impact on developing a religious culture, as reflected through exemplary leadership, inspirational communication, institutional program development, and a supportive school atmosphere (Nazula et al., 2024).

Discussion

The transformational leadership practiced by Mrs. SK at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Fathul Huda Pucung plays a significant role in shaping a strong religious culture within the school environment. Bass's theory of transformational leadership emphasizes the leader's ability to inspire and motivate followers through vision and example. Mrs. SK not only gives instructions but also serves as a moral role model for teachers and students. This aligns with research findings showing that a leader's exemplary conduct can enhance loyalty and trigger positive behavioral changes within Islamic educational institutions (Mauludah et al., 2023).

In this context, the principal's exemplary behavior is evident in her discipline and commitment to practicing religious values. Every action, such as punctuality and participation in congregational prayers, helps create an environment conducive to the development of a

religious culture. Studies have also confirmed that ideal and exemplary leadership can drive profound cultural change within Islamic education institutions, fostering a positive and productive climate (Murdianto, 2024).

Another aspect of transformational leadership demonstrated by Mrs. SK is inspirational motivation, as she seeks to uplift the religious spirit among teachers and students through meaningful communication. Research has shown that principals who apply transformational leadership styles can foster spiritual enthusiasm and a sense of togetherness, strengthening organizational commitment among teachers and students (Sugiarto & Ahmad Farid, 2024).

Mrs. SK's leadership also demonstrates intellectual stimulation by encouraging teachers to innovate in teaching Islamic values. Activities such as Qur'an memorization competitions and other creative programs enhance the active participation of both teachers and students. Previous studies note that active participation in religious activities fosters a sense of belonging to the institution and reinforces the existing religious culture (Fadilah & Hamami, 2021).

The findings of this study also reveal that religious values at MI Fathul Huda Pucung are not merely stated in policies but are lived out in daily practices, leading to deep internalization of those values. Research emphasizes that leaders who can cultivate shared values contribute to organizational stability and meaning, creating a harmonious environment for all members (Argista, 2021).

The process of developing a religious culture at MI Fathul Huda is also carried out through warm relationships and appreciation. This humanistic approach fosters comfort among teachers and students in voluntarily practicing religious values. Research indicates that transformational leadership can cultivate more inclusive relationships and reduce authoritarian tendencies within Islamic education (Nandalawi & Sentosa, 2024).

The implications of these findings suggest that transformational leadership is an effective method for building a sustainable religious culture in Islamic primary education. Leaders who nurture religious interest and values among followers can create a rich, positive learning atmosphere. This study supports the importance of leadership approaches that prioritize exemplary conduct, inspirational communication, and innovation in Islamic education.

Overall, the findings reinforce the belief that transformational leadership is key to developing a strong religious culture in madrasahs, particularly at the ibtidaiyah (elementary) level. When the principal functions as an inspirer, facilitator of change, and moral role model, the educational institution becomes not only a place of learning but also a space for character formation and the holistic spiritual development of its members.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the transformational leadership practiced by the principal of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Fathul Huda Pucung, Mrs. SK, plays a vital role in building and strengthening the school's religious culture. This leadership is reflected through consistent role modeling, inspiring communication, the empowerment of teachers and students, and the continuous development of various religious activities. Values such as discipline, togetherness, and responsibility naturally grow in the daily lives of the school community because of a leader who instills spirit and values rather than merely giving orders.

These findings reinforce the view that transformational leadership not only improves

educational quality but also effectively shapes religious character within the school environment. When the principal acts as a role model and an inspirer of values, the madrasah atmosphere becomes a religious, harmonious environment focused on cultivating noble character. Practically, the results of this study can serve as a reflection for other madrasah principals to develop a leadership style that motivates and nurtures rather than merely directs. The practice of religious habituation within the madrasah must continue to be strengthened through genuine examples,

Declaration of conflicting interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest related to this study.

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