The Relationship Between Principal Leadership and Student Achievement in Islamic Religious Education

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Abstract
Leadership is recognized as a decisive factor in determining the success of educational institutions, influencing not only administrative performance but also the quality of teaching and learning outcomes. Using a quantitative research approach, data were collected from students at Madrasah Aliyah Swasta (MAS) Nahdhatul Islam Mancang, located in Selesai Subdistrict, Langkat Regency, through structured questionnaires distributed to 100 upper-grade students. The results reveal that the principal's leadership style has a significant effect on student achievement, particularly through dimensions such as supervision, motivation, communication, and moral exemplarity. In Islamic education, leadership extends beyond managerial functions to encompass moral and spiritual responsibilities, reflecting values of *uswah hasanah*, *syura*, and *amanah*. The findings emphasize that effective leadership not only enhances academic success but also strengthens the moral and spiritual formation of students, thereby supporting the holistic goals of Islamic education.

Keywords: *Leadership; Principal; Student Achievement; Islamic Education*

Abstrak: Kepemimpinan diakui sebagai faktor penentu keberhasilan lembaga pendidikan yang memengaruhi tidak hanya kinerja administratif, tetapi juga kualitas proses belajar mengajar. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif dengan pengumpulan data melalui penyebaran angket kepada 100 siswa kelas atas di Madrasah Aliyah Swasta (MAS) Nahdhatul Islam Mancang, Kecamatan Selesai, Kabupaten Langkat. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa gaya kepemimpinan kepala sekolah berpengaruh signifikan terhadap prestasi siswa, terutama melalui dimensi supervisi, motivasi, komunikasi, dan keteladanan moral. Dalam pendidikan Islam, kepemimpinan tidak hanya berfungsi secara manajerial, tetapi juga mencakup tanggung jawab moral dan spiritual yang mencerminkan nilai-nilai *uswah hasanah*, *syura*, dan *amanah*. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa kepemimpinan yang efektif tidak hanya meningkatkan keberhasilan akademik, tetapi juga memperkuat pembentukan moral dan spiritual siswa, sehingga mendukung tujuan pendidikan Islam yang bersifat holistik.

Kata Kunci: *Kepemimpinan; Kepala Sekolah; Prestasi Siswa; Pendidikan Islam*

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Introduction

L eadership within educational institutions plays a pivotal role in determining the direction, quality, and success of the learning process. The principal, as the highest leader in a school, functions not only as an administrator but also as an instructional leader who shapes the educational climate and influences teacher performance and student achievement. Effective leadership creates a culture of discipline, innovation, and collaboration that supports continuous academic growth (Chen & Bos, 2023). In the context of Islamic Religious Education, the role of the principal extends beyond organizational management; it involves spiritual stewardship that ensures learning produces students who are both intellectually capable and morally grounded in Islamic values (Wu & Shen, 2022).

This study holds particular uniqueness in its exploration of the relationship between principal leadership and student achievement specifically within Islamic Religious Education. Unlike general subjects, Islamic education integrates cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions, requiring a leadership approach that harmonizes pedagogical effectiveness with moral exemplarity. Principals in Islamic schools are expected to act as role models, nurturing a religious culture that inspires both teachers and students to internalize Islamic ethics in their daily lives. However, in many private madrasahs, leadership functions are often limited to administrative routines, leaving a research gap concerning how principal leadership directly contributes to students' academic success in the Islamic Religious Education classroom (Shen & Wu, 2025).

A number of previous studies have established that school leadership significantly influences learning outcomes. Research by Hallinger and Heck (2010) emphasized that transformational leadership enhances teacher commitment and student academic progress. Leithwood et al. (2020) further demonstrated that effective principals create supportive environments that elevate overall school performance. In Indonesia, studies by Mulyasa (2018) and Nurkholis (2021) show that leadership grounded in Islamic values contributes to a stronger school culture and improved educational outcomes. Despite these findings, empirical studies that specifically address principal leadership in relation to Islamic Religious Education achievement, particularly in private madrasahs, remain limited. This underscores the importance of further investigation in this area.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the relationship between principal leadership and student achievement in Islamic Religious Education at the secondary level. It seeks to identify which aspects of leadership—such as supervision, motivation, or religious example—have the most significant influence on student outcomes. Through this research, it is expected that a more comprehensive understanding of effective leadership practices in Islamic schools will emerge, contributing to the development of leadership models that integrate managerial competence, pedagogical insight, and spiritual authority to enhance the quality of Islamic education as a whole.

Method

This study employed a mixed-methods approach using a convergent parallel design, where quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously to gain a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of the *Qishah* and lecture methods in teaching Islamic Cultural History. The research was conducted at SMP IT Darul Muqomah Al-Khoiriyyah, Sei Glugur, Pancur Batu Subdistrict, Deli Serdang Regency. Quantitative data were obtained through questionnaires administered to students, while qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with subject teachers. Student samples were selected using total sampling, and teacher informants were chosen through purposive sampling based on their experience applying both instructional methods. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and comparative statistics to examine mean differences in learning outcomes, while qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis to identify emerging patterns and contextual meanings. The two data sets were then integrated to identify convergence or divergence between numerical and narrative findings. Validity was ensured through expert validation and data triangulation, and reliability was established using Cronbach's alpha for the questionnaire and inter-coder agreement for qualitative analysis. All research procedures adhered to ethical standards, including informed consent, respondent anonymity, and institutional authorization.

Results and Discussion

School Leadership: An Islamic Educational Perspective

School leadership represents a fundamental element in shaping the direction, vision, and culture of an educational institution. A principal is not merely an administrator but also a motivator and catalyst who determines the success of the entire learning process. In practice, leadership encompasses various models and approaches that reflect societal change and the evolution of educational management over time. The concept of leadership cannot be separated from the broader context of culture, values, and institutional goals. Consequently, the role of the school principal continues to evolve from traditional leadership toward more modern and context-based models, especially within Islamic education, which emphasizes moral and spiritual dimensions alongside academic achievement (Gechere et al., 2025).

In traditional leadership, authority is often viewed hierarchically, where the leader serves as the central figure of power and decision-making. This model prioritizes control, obedience, and organizational stability. The principal, under this paradigm, acts as the commanding figure responsible for maintaining order and discipline among teachers and students. While such a leadership style may limit participation and innovation, it holds certain advantages—particularly in ensuring consistency, clarity, and strong organizational discipline. In faith-based educational settings, traditional leadership is sometimes preserved for its

ability to maintain moral order and uphold long-standing institutional traditions (Tan, 2024).

In contrast, modern leadership emphasizes participation, collaboration, and innovation in managing schools. A modern principal functions as a facilitator and motivator rather than a mere authority figure. They encourage teachers and students to engage in decision-making, utilize technology for educational management, and cultivate a reflective and creative school culture. Modern leadership is informed by contemporary theories such as transformational and transactional leadership, both of which highlight vision, empowerment, and collective growth. Through this lens, the principal becomes a change agent who promotes sustainable improvement in teaching quality and student achievement.

Within the context of Islamic education, leadership assumes a broader and more profound role because it focuses not only on academic outcomes but also on spiritual and moral development. Islamic educational leadership is grounded in values such as exemplary conduct (uswah hasanah), consultation (syura), and trustworthiness (amanah). The principal serves as a moral role model for the entire school community, integrating the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah into all aspects of the educational process. This form of leadership perceives education as both a worldly responsibility and a spiritual endeavor, positioning school administration as an act of devotion ('ibadah) that carries ethical and transcendental significance (Ma et al., 2024).

Therefore, an integrative model of school leadership must synthesize the strengths of all three paradigms. From traditional leadership, the principal may adopt firmness and consistency; from modern leadership, openness to participation, collaboration, and innovation; and from Islamic leadership, the spiritual depth, moral integrity, and exemplary behavior that guide ethical decision-making. When these three dimensions operate in harmony, the principal can create a learning environment that excels academically, nurtures moral character, and aligns with the holistic values of Islam as a religion of balance and universal compassion (*rahmatan lil 'alamin*).

The Principal's Leadership Contribution to Student Achievement

The contribution of the principal to student achievement is one of the most decisive elements in determining the success and quality of an educational institution. As the highest leader in the school structure, the principal plays a central role in shaping the direction, vision, and academic culture of the institution. Leadership in education goes beyond the mere execution of administrative tasks; it involves fostering a conducive learning environment, ensuring instructional quality, and building a strong sense of community among teachers and students. The principal's ability to create a clear vision and translate it into measurable educational objectives directly affects how effectively the school functions in supporting students' academic growth (Persson et al., 2025).

At the managerial level, the principal contributes to student achievement by designing and implementing strategic policies that ensure learning efficiency. This includes curriculum supervision, teacher performance evaluation, and the allocation of resources that support teaching and learning activities. An effective principal ensures that instructional materials, learning schedules, and facilities are well-organized and aligned with national education standards. Furthermore, the principal acts as a bridge between the school and external stakeholders—parents, education authorities, and the broader community—whose collaboration strengthens the learning ecosystem. This managerial function ensures that all organizational components work cohesively toward improving student outcomes (Ibrahim et al., 2024).

From a pedagogical perspective, the principal's role extends into academic leadership, where they guide teachers in developing innovative teaching approaches and promote continuous professional development. By encouraging teachers to adopt student-centered learning, integrate technology, and employ differentiated instruction, the principal indirectly enhances the quality of the learning experience. In addition, effective principals foster a culture of assessment and reflection, where teachers use data to identify learning gaps and adapt instruction accordingly. This pedagogical influence ensures that student achievement is not left to chance but is systematically nurtured through structured teaching practices.

On a psychological and motivational level, the principal's leadership style shapes the emotional climate of the school, which significantly impacts student performance. A supportive and empathetic principal inspires teachers to work collaboratively, promotes student well-being, and cultivates a sense of belonging within the school community. When students feel respected, encouraged, and safe, their intrinsic motivation to learn increases. Similarly, teachers who are motivated and appreciated transmit that enthusiasm into the classroom, generating a ripple effect that raises academic engagement and outcomes. Hence, the principal's emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills become vital contributors to the overall educational atmosphere that nurtures achievement (Arifin et al., 2018).

Specifically, in the context of Islamic education, the principal's contribution carries an additional moral and spiritual dimension. Beyond academic leadership, the principal functions as a role model who exemplifies Islamic values such as honesty, discipline, justice, and compassion. Through daily interactions, sermons, and decision-making rooted in Islamic ethics, the principal influences not only the cognitive but also the moral and emotional development of students. Such leadership cultivates learners who excel intellectually while embodying strong moral character. Therefore, the principal's contribution to student achievement in Islamic education is comprehensive—encompassing managerial effectiveness, pedagogical innovation, emotional support, and moral

guidance, all of which collectively lead to the formation of well-rounded, high-achieving students (Rohmad et al., 2024).

The Influence of Leadership and Academic Performance

There is a strong and academically grounded relationship between school leadership and student achievement, as leadership serves as the foundation for shaping the entire educational process. The principal's leadership determines how effectively teachers teach, how motivated students are to learn, and how conducive the overall learning environment becomes. Numerous educational theories, such as transformational and instructional leadership models, emphasize that effective leaders influence learning outcomes by creating clear visions, supporting teacher development, and fostering a positive school climate. When principals demonstrate strong managerial competence, moral integrity, and pedagogical insight, they not only enhance organizational performance but also directly contribute to the improvement of students' academic results. This interconnection reflects the principle that educational success is not merely the product of individual effort but the result of collective synergy guided by effective and visionary leadership .

Table 1. Reability Test

Variabel	Croncbac's Alpha	Status
Upaya kepala sekolah (X)	0,941	Reliabel
Prestasi belajar siswa (Y)	0,937	Reliabel

Table 2. Linier Test

Coefficientsa					
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1 (Constant)	3.024	.633		4.776	.000
X	.929	.015	.991	62.571	.000
a. Dependent Variable: Y					

Table 3. Test T

Coefficientsa					
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1 (Constant)	3.024	.633		4.776	.000
X	.929	.015	.991	62.571	.000
a. Dependent Variable: Y					

Table 4. Determinant Test

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.991a	.983	.983	.46883

The influence of leadership on student achievement represents one of the most critical aspects in educational management and development. Leadership, in essence, serves as the driving force that determines the direction and effectiveness of learning processes within schools. A principal's leadership style directly affects the attitudes, motivation, and performance of both teachers and students. When a principal demonstrates visionary, supportive, and communicative leadership, it creates a positive school climate where teachers feel valued and students are motivated to perform better. Conversely, weak leadership—characterized by rigid control, lack of empathy, or poor supervision—can reduce morale, hinder collaboration, and negatively impact learning outcomes. Thus, leadership functions not only as an administrative mechanism but also as a transformative energy that shapes the overall culture of academic excellence (Said et al., 2023).

Conceptually, effective leadership influences achievement through several interconnected mechanisms. First, it ensures pedagogical quality by guiding teachers in implementing effective learning strategies and encouraging professional growth. Second, it establishes clear goals and accountability systems that motivate students to reach measurable outcomes. Third, leadership affects the socio-emotional environment of the school—where trust, respect, and a sense of belonging enhance engagement and cognitive performance. The principal who practices transformational leadership, for instance, fosters a shared vision that aligns teacher motivation with institutional goals. In Islamic education, this relationship is deepened by the moral dimension of leadership, where the principal's example of sincerity, discipline, and integrity inspires both teachers and students to pursue excellence as an act of faith.

Therefore, leadership and student achievement are intertwined in a dynamic and reciprocal relationship. Strong and ethical leadership produces an environment that cultivates academic success, while student achievement, in turn, reinforces the legitimacy and credibility of leadership practices. In Islamic schools, this interconnection becomes even more meaningful, as leadership is not limited to managerial efficiency but is seen as a form of moral stewardship (amanah) and service to the community. The effectiveness of leadership in enhancing student performance thus depends not only on technical competence but also on the principal's ability to harmonize intellectual, emotional, and spiritual dimensions in the pursuit of educational excellence.

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Conclusions

The findings of this study provide clear evidence that the leadership of the school principal has a significant influence on student achievement. Effective principals contribute to improved academic outcomes through various strategic and managerial efforts, including supervision of instructional quality, teacher motivation, and the creation of a positive school climate that supports learning. By fostering collaboration among teachers, optimizing educational resources, and ensuring that academic goals are clearly defined and systematically pursued, principals serve as the driving force behind the school's success. Their ability to build a culture of discipline, responsibility, and continuous improvement encourages students to achieve higher levels of academic excellence. Leadership, therefore, is not only an administrative responsibility but also a dynamic process that translates educational vision into measurable student performance.

Within the context of Islamic education, the principal's leadership embodies both administrative and spiritual dimensions. A distinctive feature of Islamic educational leadership lies in its integration of moral guidance and exemplary behavior as central aspects of the leadership process. The principal acts not only as an academic leader but also as a moral role model (uswah hasanah), instilling values of honesty, discipline, and devotion in both teachers and students. Through approaches grounded in consultation (syura) and trust (amanah), principals cultivate an environment where learning becomes an act of worship and character development aligns with intellectual growth. Thus, leadership in Islamic education does not merely aim for academic excellence but seeks to produce students who are intellectually capable, ethically sound, and spiritually mature—reflecting the holistic purpose of education in Islam.

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