

# Transformational Leadership of Kiai in Character Building: Exploring Teachers' Lived Experience in Islamic Institutions

Mawardi\*, Aan Komariah<sup>ORCID</sup>, Sururi<sup>ORCID</sup>, Suryadi, Eka Prihatin<sup>ORCID</sup>

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Dr. Setiabudhi St. No. 229, Bandung 40154, West Java, Indonesia

\*Corresponding author, email: mawardi@upi.edu

doi: 10.17977/um065.v6.i4.2026.2

## Article history

Submitted: 6 February 2026

Revised: 8 March 2026

Accepted: 11 March 2026

Published: 26 March 2026

## Keywords

Character formation

Islamic leadership

Organizational change

Phenomenological research

Professional development

## Abstract

This research explores the lived experience of teachers implementing Islamic leadership values in educational institutions through an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach. Involving one teacher participant from an Islamic secondary school undergoing management reform, this study identifies significant gaps between ideal Islamic leadership and practical implementation. Three major themes emerged: an Islamic value-practice gap, in which Islamic principles were formally invoked in institutional discourse yet incompletely operationalized in relational and decision-making structures; a capacity-readiness deficit, in which structural reform was introduced ahead of human resource preparation, producing implementation failure that was rational rather than attitudinal in character; and professional development formalism, in which institutional learning programs were experienced as certification-oriented compliance exercises rather than substantive supports for teacher professional identity. Together, these themes converge on a central finding: theological commitment at the leadership level does not, by itself, produce Islamic value enactment at the organizational level. The study contributes theoretical insights for contextualizing Islamic leadership in modern educational organizations and provides practical recommendations for improving institutional management through participatory governance mechanisms, sequenced capacity building, and professionally relevant learning programs.

## 1. Introduction

Islamic educational institutions occupy a unique and contested position at the intersection of religious tradition and contemporary organizational demands - a condition that generates fundamental dilemmas for those entrusted with their leadership. In the era of globalization, pressures to modernize institutional governance increasingly collide with the imperative to preserve religious identity and cultural values, creating structural tensions that no administrative reform can resolve without first understanding their human dimensions (Kosim et al., 2023; Arar et al., 2022). Indonesia, with the world's largest Muslim-majority population and over 82,000 madrasah institutions serving more than 9.6 million students, represents a particularly significant yet understudied context for Islamic educational leadership research (Abdurrahman et al., 2025; Karim et al., 2023). Islamic leadership in this context transcends mere managerial competence; it functions as a transformative influence that integrates spiritual dimensions with professional competence, encouraging teachers and students to develop religious consciousness aligned with the Islamic ethos (Alazmi & Bush, 2024; Arar et al., 2022). This integration demands a holistic leadership model grounded in values such as *ukhuwah Islamiyah* (Islamic brotherhood), *syura* (consultative decision-making), and *tawassuth* (moderation) - principles that simultaneously constitute normative ideals and practical organizational challenges requiring deep contextual understanding before effective interventions can be designed (Said et al., 2023; Brooks et al., 2020).

Central to the Indonesian Islamic educational landscape is the figure of the kiai - a spiritual authority whose role encompasses religious, pedagogical, and organizational leadership simultaneously. As bearers of religious legitimacy inherited through the pesantren tradition, kiai shape institutional cultures that are normative and adaptive, authoritative and relational, creating governance structures that differ fundamentally from those analyzed in mainstream Western leadership scholarship (Subandi et al., 2021; Aini et al., 2021). The kiai's dual role as spiritual guide and institutional administrator generates a permanent site of tension: the same religious authority that provides organizational cohesion may simultaneously constrain participatory mechanisms and teacher agency (Karim et al., 2023; Ibrahim et al., 2023). Research on kiai leadership in pesantren contexts has grown, yet the majority of studies examine kiai practices from an institutional or theological perspective, leaving the lived experiences of teachers who work under this leadership largely unexplored (Subandi et al., 2021; Tanjung, 2022). Understanding how teachers experience, negotiate, and are shaped by kiai-led leadership

therefore provides a critical bottom-up lens through which Islamic educational leadership theory can be examined and enriched.

Over the past three decades, scholarly attention to Islamic educational leadership has grown substantially, yet the field remains characterized by significant theoretical and methodological limitations. Most of the existing literature continues to be dominated by Western ideological frameworks and theoretical paradigms, while contextual Islamic perspectives - particularly those grounded in local institutional realities across Muslim-majority societies - remain inadequately explored (Alazmi & Bush, 2024; Ezzani et al., 2023). A systematic review of Islamic-based educational leadership published between 1990 and 2021 found that no studies on this subject appeared prior to 2003, and that theoretical frameworks have consistently lagged behind the rapidly evolving empirical realities of Islamic educational institutions worldwide (Arar et al., 2022). Efforts to develop Islamic-contextual leadership frameworks have emerged - including critical spirituality models, socio-religious leadership frameworks, and value-based institutional analysis - yet these contributions remain predominantly focused on principal or institutional-level leadership rather than on the relational and experiential dimensions of teacher-level implementation (Brooks & Ezzani, 2022; Amatullah, 2024).

Research in this field has predominantly adopted top-down approaches that prioritize leader characteristics, principal practices, and organizational outcomes, while the experiences of teachers - who are the primary implementers of leadership values at the classroom and interpersonal levels - receive conspicuously insufficient attention (Said et al., 2023). A systematic literature review of Islamic school principal leadership identified instructional practices, relational engagement, and ethical value implementation as central themes, yet consistently noted the absence of teacher-centered inquiry as a structural gap in the literature (Said et al., 2023). Studies on transformational leadership in pesantren and madrasah contexts have demonstrated significant associations between leadership style and teacher organizational commitment, professional satisfaction, and performance outcomes (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Tanjung, 2022). However, quantitative evidence about outcomes does not illuminate the interpretive processes through which teachers assign meaning to leadership practices, construct professional identity within religiously regulated institutional environments, or develop coping strategies for navigating organizational reform dynamics (Aini et al., 2021; Memon et al., 2024).

The domain of character building and professional development within Islamic educational institutions reveals further critical gaps. Character development - a core mission of Islamic schooling encapsulated in the *tarbiyah* function - requires not merely formal policy articulation but sustained relational engagement between leaders and teachers that translates values from doctrinal pronouncement into lived organizational practice (Suhid et al., 2021; Succarie, 2024). Yet professional development programs in Islamic institutions are frequently designed around administrative compliance requirements and certification targets rather than substantive transformation of teacher practice, producing formalistic engagement with learning systems rather than genuine professional growth (Nisa & Aimah, 2024; Abdurrahman et al., 2025). Teachers in these institutions face professional identity complexities that require balancing personal religious obligations with contemporary professional demands, yet the psychological, spiritual, and social dimensions of this navigation remain undertheorized in the literature (Arar et al., 2022; Alazmi & Bush, 2024). This creates a significant gap between the normative aspirations of Islamic leadership and the organizational realities experienced by teachers at the institutional ground level.

This study aims to address the identified gap by centering teacher voices within Islamic educational leadership scholarship in the Indonesian madrasah context. Specifically, this study pursues five objectives: (1) to explore teacher perceptions and experiences regarding Islamic leadership value implementation in decision-making, interpersonal interaction, and organizational participation; (2) to identify specific teacher adaptation challenges across psychological, spiritual, and social dimensions; (3) to evaluate the impact of management reforms on the effectiveness of *dakwah* and *tarbiyah* tasks from a teacher perspective; (4) to assess the quality and effectiveness of professional development programs from the teacher's perspective, including the identification of program design gaps; and (5) to identify patterns of organizational culture innovation and change resistance while revealing their roots at the individual teacher level.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Research Design

This study employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design exploring a teacher's lived experience of implementing and adapting to kiai-led Islamic leadership in an Indonesian Islamic secondary school context. IPA methodology selection reflects several theoretical and methodological justifications: phenomenological interpretative approaches enable deep exploration of how individuals construct meaning around experiences within specific contexts, aligning with research objectives understanding subjective perceptions, interpretations, and teacher experiences regarding Islamic leadership; phenomenological designs access complex psychological, spiritual, and social dimensions difficult through quantitative or survey approaches; research questions exploring 'how' and 'why' rather than 'how many' or 'how much' necessitate

exploratory approaches; identified research gaps indicate that bottom-up teacher perspectives on Islamic leadership system experiences remain severely limited, requiring approaches that generate rich, thick descriptions of the studied phenomena (Smith et al., 2022); Islamic leadership practice phenomena prove contextual and influenced by complex social, cultural, and power dynamics requiring interpretative approaches for understanding actor-constructed meanings within organizational contexts (Arar et al., 2022). The phenomenological interpretative design followed frameworks developed by Smith and colleagues, emphasizing double hermeneutics wherein researchers understand how participants construct meaning around experiences while recognizing that researcher interpretations reflect theoretical perspectives and personal researcher experiences.

## 2.2. Research Setting

This research was conducted at an Islamic secondary school (*Madrasah Tsanawiyah*) in West Java, Indonesia - a region with a dense concentration of Islamic educational institutions reflecting a broad spectrum of organizational maturity, from traditionally pesantren-based structures to more formally managed school models. The selected institution operates under the leadership of a *kiai* figure who simultaneously serves as the school's spiritual and administrative authority, a governance model characteristic of Islamic educational institutions in the Indonesian context. The institution had recently undergone a period of organizational reform involving the introduction of new management structures, digital administration systems, and revised professional development programs - a context that renders it particularly relevant for exploring the tensions between Islamic leadership ideals and organizational change realities.

The school enrolls approximately 300–400 students across three grade levels, employs a teaching staff of 25–35 teachers across subject specializations, and operates under national curriculum guidelines from the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kementerian Agama) while maintaining an integrated Islamic studies curriculum. The institutional setting thus represents a hybrid organizational form balancing national educational standards with Islamic pedagogical traditions - precisely the kind of context where the implementation of Islamic leadership values encounters the structural challenges identified in the research gap.

## 2.3. Participant Selection and Justification for Single Participant

This study purposively selected one teacher participant who met the following inclusion criteria: (1) minimum two years of employment at the research institution, ensuring direct and sustained exposure to the *kiai*-led Islamic leadership system and its reform dynamics; (2) active participation in institutional management reform processes; (3) engagement in teacher professional development programs offered by the school; (4) willingness to share experiences openly and in depth through extended interviews; and (5) provision of written informed consent.

The decision to focus on a single participant requires explicit epistemological justification, as it departs from the more common IPA convention of three to ten participants. A legitimate concern arising from this choice is the risk of bias: if only one voice is analyzed, findings may reflect idiosyncratic personal circumstances rather than phenomena meaningful beyond the individual case. This concern, however, is addressed at two levels - epistemological and procedural. At the epistemological level, IPA is, at its philosophical core, an idiographic methodology committed to the intensive, case-by-case examination of individual experience as a primary unit of inquiry, prior to any move toward cross-case generalization (Hartman & Squires, 2024). The goal of IPA is not statistical representation but interpretive depth: to understand, as fully and rigorously as possible, how one person makes sense of a specific lived experience within a specific context. Bias in the sampling sense - the risk that one participant does not represent a population - is therefore not a methodological threat to IPA in the way it would be to survey-based or experimental designs. What IPA requires instead is that the single case be analytically justified, that the analysis be sufficiently deep and evidentially grounded, and that interpretive conclusions be presented with appropriate scope and transferability claims (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023).

At the procedural level, the risk of researcher-imposed interpretation - a more legitimate bias concern in qualitative single-case designs - was systematically mitigated through three mechanisms: (1) member checking, whereby the participant reviewed emergent themes and verified that researcher interpretations remained consonant with their own meaning-making; (2) thick description supported by direct verbatim quotation, enabling readers to independently assess the plausibility of interpretive conclusions; and (3) reflexivity documentation, in which the researcher maintained analytical memos recording interpretive decisions and potential influences of theoretical pre-understandings throughout the analysis process. These procedures are consistent with established trustworthiness criteria for IPA research (Adler, 2022) and collectively function to ensure that the analysis reflects the participant's experiential world rather than the researcher's assumptions.

This methodological choice is further justified by the nature of the research context. The participant occupies a uniquely information-rich organizational position - a subject-specialist teacher with more than two years of continuous exposure to the institution's reform processes, direct engagement with the *kiai*-led leadership system, and active participation in professional development structures. In contexts where access to

deeply reflective, articulate informants with relevant and sustained institutional experience is limited, a carefully selected single case analyzed with full IPA rigor represents a methodologically defensible and epistemologically valuable research design. The analytical value of this study lies not in how many teachers were studied, but in how deeply one teacher's experience was understood and theorized (Staller, 2021).

## 2.4. Interview Protocol

Data were collected through a semi-structured in-depth interview, which constitutes the primary and most appropriate data collection instrument for IPA research (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The semi-structured format enables the participant to narrate experiences in their own language and sequence while ensuring systematic coverage of theoretically relevant domains - a balance essential to IPA's dual commitment to phenomenological openness and hermeneutic structure.

The interview protocol was developed through a systematic process: (1) derivation of question domains from the five research objectives and the three theoretical frameworks (transformational-democratic Islamic leadership, organizational adaptation, and change management theory); (2) formulation of open-ended questions designed to elicit narrative rather than categorical responses; and (3) piloting of question sequence for logical coherence and participant comprehensibility. The protocol comprised twelve primary questions organized across five thematic domains, as presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Semi-Structured Interview Protocol**

No.	Thematic Domain	Interview Question
1	Domain 1: Islamic Leadership Value Implementation	How would you describe how Islamic values - such as syura, ukhuwah, and tawassuth - are applied in the day-to-day decision-making of your institution?
2		In your experience, how does your leader (kiai/principal) apply Islamic principles in their interactions with teachers and staff?
3		In what ways, if any, do you feel there is a gap between the Islamic leadership ideals promoted by the institution and what you actually experience in practice?
4	Domain 2: Organizational Dynamics and Decision-Making	To what extent do you feel your voice is heard and valued in institutional meetings and decision-making processes?
5		How has the relationship between teachers and the principal or kiai changed - if at all - since the recent management reforms were introduced?
6	Domain 3: Management Reform Impact on Dakwah and Tarbiyah	How have the recent management reforms affected your capacity to carry out your dakwah and tarbiyah responsibilities as a teacher in this institution?
7		What challenges, if any, have you encountered in implementing the new regulations or systems introduced through the reform process?
8		Can you describe your experience with the professional development programs available at this institution - what has been useful, and what has fallen short?
9	Domain 4: Professional Development and Adaptation	What has been the most personally challenging aspect of adapting to the leadership style and organizational culture of this institution?
10		How do you experience colleagues' responses to new initiatives or changes proposed by the leadership - and how do you personally navigate those dynamics?
11		In your view, what are the main barriers to meaningful innovation in this institution, and where do you see those barriers originating?
12		Looking back on your experience here, how would you describe what it means to work under Islamic leadership in this institution - what has it given you, and what has it cost you?

Each question was formulated to be sufficiently open to allow the participant to take the lead in shaping the direction of the narrative, while the sequence followed a deliberate progression from descriptive-contextual (Questions 1-3) to evaluative-reflective (Questions 4-9) to integrative-existential (Questions 10-12), enabling increasing depth of disclosure as the interview progressed.

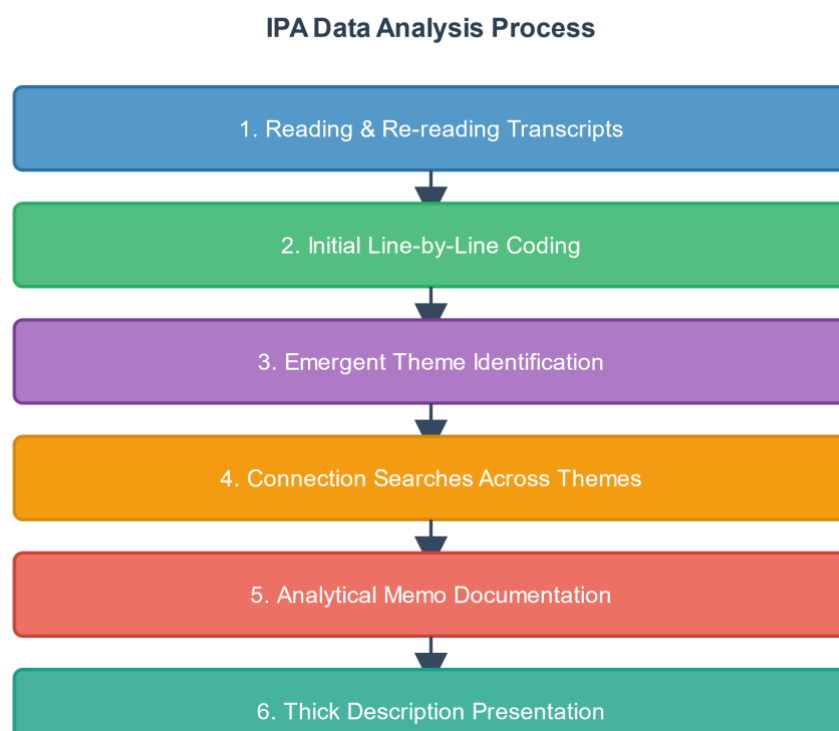
## 2.5. Data Collection Procedure

Data collection proceeded through systematic stages: ethical clearance acquisition ensuring research met human subject research standards; participant identification and recruitment through personal communication explaining research objectives, participant rights, and confidentiality procedures; semi-structured interview implementation in comfortable private settings enabling open experience sharing, with 60-90 minute duration allowing deep exploration; audio recording with participant permission and verbatim transcription ensuring data accuracy and completeness; and secure data management using password-protected files stored in secure

cloud storage with participant anonymization through pseudonym use and identifiable information removal (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023).

## 2.6. Data Analysis

Data analysis employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology involving iterative interpretation processes wherein researchers understand how participants construct experience meaning while recognizing researcher interpretation formation through theoretical perspectives (Ahmed, 2024). Analysis proceeded through six systematic stages: reading and re-reading transcripts achieving data immersion and familiarization; initial line-by-line coding identifying significant content, distinctive language use, and implicit conceptual understanding at descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual levels; emergent theme identification capturing participant experience essences through concise statements capturing understanding about what matters to participants; connection searches across emergent themes organizing themes into clusters or superordinate themes through abstraction, subsumption, polarization, contextualization, and function strategies; analytical memo documentation explaining analysis decision-making processes; and thick description presentation with direct quotation support enabling reader interpretation assessment. The complete six-stage data analysis process is illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Data Analysis Process**

## 2.7. Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness procedures included ensuring internal validity through thick description enabling reader context and process understanding; acknowledging transferability limitations - recognizing that findings are most analytically applicable to Islamic secondary institutions sharing similar contextual characteristics: kiai-led governance structures, active management reform processes, and teacher professional development challenges operating within Indonesian Islamic educational policy frameworks; and credibility enhancement through member checking, whereby the participant was invited to verify researcher interpretations of themes emerging from their account, ensuring that analytical conclusions remained grounded in the participant's own meaning-making rather than researcher imposition (McKim, 2023).

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Results

Analysis of the interview transcript through the six-stage IPA process yielded three superordinate themes that together constitute a phenomenological account of one teacher's lived experience of kiai-led Islamic leadership in an Indonesian madrasah context. The three themes are: (1) Islamic Leadership Value Implementation Gap; (2) Organizational Dynamics and Management Reformation; and (3) Professional

Development and Adaptation Challenges. The thematic structure emerging from the analysis is presented in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Result of Analysis Data

### 3.1.1. Islamic Leadership Value Implementation Gap

The first theme captures the participant's experience of a persistent distance between the Islamic values formally invoked in institutional life and their realization in day-to-day organizational practice. At the level of decision-making, the participant described the institution's orientation as 'based on what is in the Quran,' indicating genuine theological commitment at the leadership level. However, this formal commitment coexisted with a perceived gap: the participant observed that institutional interpretation of Islamic moderation tended to reflect 'majority belief interpretation' rather than genuinely inclusive deliberation, suggesting that Islamic principles were being selectively operationalized in ways that consolidated existing authority rather than enabling plural participation.

This tension extended into interpersonal relations. The participant characterized the leader-teacher relationship as 'ordinary with a gap between teacher and principal, but not negative - the principal was relatively friendly.' This account reveals a structural paradox: individual leader warmth did not dissolve the hierarchical distance that constrained the depth of *ukhuwah Islamiyah* in practice. The finding points to a condition in which Islamic values are present in institutional discourse but remain incompletely embedded in the relational and governance structures through which they must ultimately be lived.

### 3.1.2. Organizational Dynamics and Management Reformation

The second theme emerged from the participant's accounts of how organizational processes and management reform efforts were experienced at the teacher level. Regarding decision-making participation, the participant noted that 'in meetings, sometimes involved but more often senior voices are heard,' indicating that formal participatory structures did not translate into equitable voice distribution. The dominance of senior figures in institutional deliberation reflects a governance pattern in which hierarchical seniority operates as an organizing principle that qualifies - rather than enables - the consultative ideals of Islamic leadership.

The impact of management reform on core educational functions was experienced as limited. The participant observed that reform 'didn't impact much because SDM here isn't quite ready to implement changes, requiring more introduction and adaptation.' This account identifies a capacity-readiness deficit: institutional reform was initiated faster than the human resource development necessary to sustain it, producing a gap between the structural intent of change and its functional realization in *dakwah* and *tarbiyah* practice. At the regulatory level, the participant further described the challenge of 'dealing with people frequently violating regulations because they perceive regulations as too rigid,' illustrating how compliance frameworks, when experienced as externally imposed rather than internally meaningful, generate resistance rather than alignment.

### 3.1.3. Professional Development and Adaptation Challenges

The third theme encompasses the participant's experience of psychological and social adaptation to the institution's leadership culture, as well as their assessment of professional development structures. Adaptation to the institutional environment was described as a demanding process of idealism management: 'the hardest part is lowering idealistic side, facing people with characters very different from ours, but Allah is fair, those not matching we eventually filter gradually.' This account reveals three intertwined dimensions of adaptation experience: the pressure to compress personal professional idealism, the relational complexity arising from character diversity among colleagues, and the role of Islamic faith frameworks as a psychological coping resource that enabled the participant to sustain engagement without descending into disillusionment.

Innovation within the institution was experienced as structurally hindered by organizational culture inertia. The participant identified the primary challenge as 'motivating colleagues because their basic mindset is already lazy innovating,' indicating that the barrier to institutional change was not primarily structural but dispositional - rooted in a normative acceptance of stagnation among teaching staff. Professional development programs offered by the institution were assessed as substantively inadequate: 'There's a smart platform already quite outdated, e-course with just a post-test, doesn't really produce something - really theoretical, ultimately people use just for formality meeting certification requirement.' This account captures what the participant experienced as professional development formalism: programs that fulfill administrative requirements without generating genuine professional growth. MGMP participation similarly reflected reluctant compliance rather than substantive engagement: 'There's MGMP per subject cluster... That has supervisors, but teachers also are reluctant.'

## 3.2. Discussion

### 3.2.1. Islamic Leadership Value Implementation Gap

The first superordinate theme reveals a structural tension that sits at the heart of Islamic educational governance: the gap between normatively prescribed Islamic values and the organizational practices through which those values are enacted. The participant's description of institutional decision-making as 'based on what is in the Quran' indicates a sincere theological orientation at the leadership level; yet simultaneously, the participant perceived that the dominant interpretation of Islamic moderation reflected majority belief rather than a genuinely plural deliberation of Islamic principles. This internal contradiction - whereby theological legitimacy is invoked to authorize a particular ideological position rather than to invite dialogue - constitutes what this study terms an Islamic value-practice gap: the condition in which Islamic principles are formally present in institutional discourse while remaining incompletely operationalized in daily relational and decision-making structures.

The paradox of personal warmth coexisting with hierarchical relational distance further deepens this gap. The participant characterized the leader-teacher relationship as 'ordinary with a gap, but not negative - the principal was relatively friendly,' which reveals that individual leader disposition, though positive, does not automatically dissolve the structural distance that constrains the realization of *ukhuwah* Islamiyah. This finding underscores that Islamic values such as brotherhood, justice (*adl*), and consultative governance (*syura*) are not self-implementing - they require deliberate organizational architecture to become lived institutional realities.

This interpretation is consonant with Alazmi and Bush's (2024) theoretical work proposing an Islamic-oriented educational leadership model that deliberately integrates faith principles with structural governance mechanisms. Alazmi and Bush (2024) argue that effective Islamic leadership in Muslim societies cannot rely on

cultural assumption alone but must embed Islamic values into the formal and informal structures through which institutions operate. The present findings extend this argument from the theoretical to the phenomenological level: through the teacher's account, it becomes evident that the gap is experienced not as ideological failure but as an organizational design problem. Arar et al. (2022), in their systematic international review of Islamic-based educational leadership, similarly identify a persistent pattern in which normative prescriptions dominate the literature while empirical studies on how teachers experience Islamic leadership at the institutional level remain scarce. Said et al. (2023) further document that leadership quality in Islamic schools is frequently assessed through formal compliance with Islamic norms rather than through the relational and participatory indicators that Islamic principles themselves prescribe. Amatullah's (2024) study of female Muslim educational leadership in Canada similarly identifies how structural conditions of institutions shape the extent to which Islamic values can be authentically enacted, irrespective of individual leaders' intentions.

Theoretically, Theme 1 contributes a phenomenological elaboration of the Islamic value-practice gap as a structural - rather than merely individual - phenomenon. Where existing models tend to locate implementation failure in leader capacity or theological literacy (Alazmi & Bush, 2024; Said et al., 2023), this study demonstrates that the gap emerges from the intersection of power dynamics, interpretive plurality, and organizational micro-politics. The participant's experience suggests that Islamic educational leadership research must expand its theoretical frame to incorporate how organizational authority structures condition the translation of Islamic values into practice.

### 3.2.2. Organizational Dynamics and Management Reformation

The second theme discloses how management reform - however structurally well-designed - encounters the stubborn reality of human resource readiness and cultural inertia. The participant observed that reform 'didn't impact much because SDM here isn't quite ready to implement changes, requiring more introduction and adaptation,' which identifies a fundamental sequencing problem: structural reform was introduced before the relational and capacity conditions necessary to sustain it were in place. The regulatory tension, where teachers perceived rules as 'too rigid' and frequently violated them, reflects a deeper dynamic: when governance reform is experienced as external imposition rather than collectively negotiated necessity, compliance becomes performative rather than substantive.

These findings are in dialogue with Brooks et al.'s (2020) research on principals in Islamic schools as socio-religious curators, which documents how leaders in Islamic educational institutions must navigate tensions between progressive institutional reform and the conservative organizational cultures embedded in religious community expectations. The present study extends this insight by showing that the resistance encountered by reform is not simply ideological conservatism but, in large part, a rational response to insufficient preparation and support. Abdurrahman et al. (2025) and Nisa and Aimah (2024) propose that organizational change management in Islamic institutions requires attention to cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions simultaneously; the participant's account confirms this multidimensionality. Critically, the most salient constraint in this context was not attitudinal resistance but capacity inadequacy - teachers lacked the skills and orientation to implement reforms, not simply the willingness. This distinction between capacity-driven and attitude-driven resistance has significant implications for how institutional leaders design change interventions.

Theme 2 makes a theoretical contribution by refining the concept of organizational change resistance in Islamic educational settings. Existing frameworks tend to treat resistance as primarily attitudinal or cultural (Nisa & Aimah, 2024; Abdurrahman et al., 2025), but this study's phenomenological data suggest that what appears as resistance is frequently a capacity-readiness deficit - a structural condition that requires investment in preparation time, skill development, and phased introduction rather than a motivational intervention. This reframing suggests that shura-based participatory decision-making, as a core Islamic governance principle, is not simply a normative ideal but a functional necessity for organizational reform - because genuine participation produces the shared ownership and preparedness that structural imposition cannot generate.

### 3.2.3. Professional Development and Adaptation Challenges

The third theme exposes the psychological and professional texture of teacher experience within a reforming Islamic institution, revealing three analytically distinct layers: idealism compression, faith-based coping, and structural professional development formalism. The participant's articulation that adaptation's hardest dimension was 'lowering my idealistic side, facing people with characters very different from ours - but Allah is fair, those not matching we eventually filter gradually' describes not a simple adjustment to a new environment but a sustained psychological labor in which the participant must simultaneously compromise idealism, develop tolerance for interpersonal difference, and recruit religious belief as a coping framework. The invocation of divine justice - 'Allah is fair' - suggests that Islamic faith functions here as a form of cognitive reframing that transforms unresolvable interpersonal tension into acceptable organizational reality.

Regarding professional development, the participant's characterization of the institutional platform as 'already quite outdated - e-course with just a post-test, doesn't really produce something, ultimately people use

it just for formality meeting certification requirements' names a well-documented pathology: the transformation of professional learning into an administrative compliance exercise, where the observable output (certification) displaces the intended outcome (pedagogical growth). The reluctant engagement with MGMP despite its formal structure further confirms that participation structures alone - absent relevance, relational quality, and perceived professional utility - produce attendance without engagement.

Memon et al. (2024), in their foundational work on Islamic teacher education, identify the professional identity of teachers in Islamic schools as constitutively complex: teachers must balance institutional Islamic obligations with contemporary professional demands, and this identity negotiation is a continuous rather than one-time process. The participant's experience of idealism compression corresponds precisely to this characterization. Suhid et al. (2021) document analogous challenges in Malaysian Islamic school settings, where teacher readiness for innovation is undermined not by attitudinal unwillingness but by the absence of contextually appropriate professional development frameworks. Succarie (2024) similarly finds that professional development effectiveness in Islamic schools is contingent on program relevance to teachers' perceived professional needs and identity formation.

Theme 3 yields two theoretical contributions. First, it positions religious coping as an organizational variable, not merely a personal psychological mechanism. When teachers systematically deploy Islamic faith frameworks to manage institutional tensions, this constitutes a collective adaptive response to structural inadequacy. This finding integrates with Sanderse's (2024) conceptualization of faith-based coping as simultaneously protective and potentially complacency-enabling: the participant's coping language suggests acceptance rather than advocacy for change, which, at scale, may contribute to organizational inertia. Second, the study contributes a formalism-substance continuum as an analytical tool for evaluating professional development in Islamic educational institutions - from the formalism pole (attendance, certification) to the substantive pole (internalized professional identity development). This continuum extends Memon et al.'s (2024) framework by providing a phenomenologically grounded account of what the formalism end looks and feels like from the inside.

### 3.2.4. Overall Theoretical Contributions

Considered together, the three themes yield a set of theoretical contributions that extend existing frameworks in Islamic educational leadership. First, this study is - to the best of the authors' knowledge - among the first to apply IPA to the study of Islamic educational leadership from the teacher's phenomenological perspective in an Indonesian madrasah context. By employing an idiographic methodology that prioritizes depth of individual experience over breadth of aggregate patterns, the study surfaces organizational realities - idealism compression, faith-mediated coping, value-practice gaps - that survey-based and cross-sectional approaches systematically underreport (Smith et al., 2022; Arar et al., 2022).

Second, the study challenges the implicit assumption in much Islamic educational leadership research that theological commitment at the leadership level is sufficient to produce Islamic value enactment at the organizational level. The evidence presented here demonstrates that the translation of Islamic principles into institutional practice requires structural enablers - participatory mechanisms, capacity preparation, relevant professional learning - that are distinct from and not reducible to theological orientation. This finding complicates leader-centric models in the field (Alazmi & Bush, 2024; Said et al., 2023) and calls for a more structurally attentive theoretical vocabulary.

Third, by foregrounding the kiai's dual role as spiritual authority and administrative reformer, this study contributes an empirically grounded case to theorizations of Islamic institutional leadership as a site of permanent tension between traditional authority structures and modern governance demands. The kiai's authority, while theologically unquestioned, does not automatically translate into effective organizational transformation - precisely because transformation requires the relational and participatory conditions that hierarchical authority alone cannot create (Brooks et al., 2020; Amatullah, 2024).

## 3.3. Practical Implications

The findings of this study carry concrete implications across three levels: institutional practice, educational policy, and teacher professional development design.

### 3.3.1. Implications for Institutional Practice

At the institutional level, the most urgent implication concerns the design of participatory decision-making mechanisms. The dominance of senior voices in meetings, as described by the participant, indicates that formal participation structures do not themselves guarantee equitable contribution. School leaders - and kiai particularly, given their dual institutional authority - should introduce structured facilitation practices that deliberately redistribute speaking and decision-making opportunities across experience levels. Techniques such as collaborative agenda-setting, written input rounds prior to meetings, and cross-seniority working groups can

operationalize the Islamic principle of *syura* in a structurally meaningful way rather than allowing it to remain a formal aspiration (Arar et al., 2022; Said et al., 2023).

The findings also imply that management reform must be sequenced to prioritize human resource preparation before structural implementation. The participant's account of reform failing because 'SDM isn't quite ready' is a direct institutional message: institutional leaders should conduct baseline capacity assessments before introducing new administrative or regulatory systems, invest in phased and contextualized capacity building, and build in adequate transition periods that allow teachers to develop the skills and psychological readiness necessary to engage meaningfully with change.

Reducing the relational distance between *kiai* and teachers is a third institutional priority implied by the findings. Informal interaction spaces - regular informal consultations, mentoring pairs that cross seniority lines, collegial planning sessions organized around substantive educational questions rather than administrative compliance - can help translate the leader's individual warmth into a genuine organizational culture of *ukhuwah Islamiyah*.

### 3.3.2. Implications for Professional Development Policy

The characterization of institutional professional development as 'just a post-test - ultimately used for formality' carries a direct policy implication for the Kementerian Agama's oversight and accreditation of professional development programs in madrasah settings: certification-based evaluation frameworks that measure teacher participation in terms of attendance and assessment completion systematically incentivize formalism and disincentivize substantive engagement. Policy redesign should shift evaluation frameworks toward evidence of application: what did the teacher implement in their classroom as a result of professional development participation? (Memon et al., 2024; Suhid et al., 2021).

The reluctance toward MGMP engagement implies that peer learning communities in Islamic schools require a redesign of their purpose and facilitation rather than simply better enforcement of participation mandates. Programs anchored in teachers' own professional challenges - co-constructing lesson materials, analyzing student work, addressing specific pedagogical gaps - are more likely to generate intrinsic motivation to participate. Aligning MGMP activities with teachers' actual professional identity needs, rather than with administrative calendar requirements, is a structural precondition for meaningful engagement (Succarie, 2024).

### 3.3.3. Implications for Islamic Educational Leadership Development

Finally, this study implies that leadership development programs for *kiai* and madrasah principals in Indonesia should incorporate organizational design competencies alongside the theological and pedagogical competencies that currently dominate such programs. Understanding how to create participatory structures, manage change processes that attend to human readiness, and design professional learning that builds genuine capacity are organizational skills - not merely spiritual ones. Leadership development curricula anchored in the Islamic governance principles of *amanah*, *adl*, and *syura* should translate those principles into specific organizational design practices, equipping leaders with the practical tools to operationalize their theological commitments (Alazmi & Bush, 2024).

## 3.4. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several limitations of this study must be acknowledged in order to situate its findings appropriately and to guide future research design.

The most salient limitation is the single-participant design. While this design is epistemologically consistent with IPA's idiographic commitment to depth over breadth, and while the single case has been justified on methodological and contextual grounds in the Method section, it necessarily constrains the transferability of findings. Transferability is analytically possible - as IPA methodology provides - but it remains the reader's judgment, not the researcher's claim (Smith et al., 2022; Ahmed, 2024).

A second limitation concerns the single-institution scope. The research site is a Madrasah Tsanawiyah under Kementerian Agama authority in West Java, Indonesia, currently undergoing management reform within a *kiai*-led governance structure. Comparative case studies across multiple institutions would be necessary to assess the generalizability of the value-practice gap and capacity-readiness deficit concepts proposed here (Arar et al., 2022; Brooks et al., 2020).

Third, data collection relied exclusively on semi-structured interview, without triangulation through participant observation, document analysis, or secondary participant accounts. Future studies applying IPA to Islamic educational leadership would benefit from supplementary data sources that could provide contextual grounding for participant accounts without displacing the phenomenological primacy of the participant's meaning-making (Smith et al., 2022).

Fourth, researcher positionality constitutes a potential limitation. The researchers' own institutional positioning - as academics in Indonesian educational psychology - brings both contextual familiarity and potential interpretive bias. The IPA principle of bracketing was applied throughout the analytical process to manage researcher pre-assumptions, and member checking was employed to ensure interpretive grounding in participant language; however, residual positionality effects cannot be entirely eliminated (Ahmed, 2024).

Fifth, as a cross-sectional phenomenological study, this research captures a single temporal slice of the participant's experience within an institution that is explicitly in the process of reform. Longitudinal designs that track the same participant - or comparable participants - across reform phases would illuminate whether and how teacher experiences of the value-practice gap, capacity-readiness deficit, and professional development formalism evolve as reform matures (Arar et al., 2022; Alazmi & Bush, 2024).

These limitations collectively point toward a productive future research agenda. Longitudinal designs that follow teachers across distinct phases of institutional reform would illuminate how the Islamic value-practice gap, capacity-readiness deficit, and professional development formalism evolve as institutions mature their reform processes (Arar et al., 2022). Comparative case studies examining multiple Islamic educational institutions across different governance structures - *pesantren*, full-day Islamic schools, and state-affiliated madrasah - would determine whether the three themes identified here represent context-specific findings or broader structural patterns (Abdurrahman et al., 2025). Research exploring how teachers across diverse Islamic educational traditions and global contexts construct meaning around Islamic leadership would advance theoretical generalizability beyond the single West Java institutional context (Alazmi & Bush, 2024). Mixed-methods designs combining IPA's phenomenological depth with broader survey or institutional analysis would provide more comprehensive understanding that balances individual experience detail with institutional pattern identification (Smith et al., 2022; Arar et al., 2022). Finally, studies examining how Islamic educational leadership development programs can be redesigned to include organizational design competencies alongside theological and pedagogical training would address one of the most actionable practical gaps this study identifies (Memon et al., 2024).

## 4. Conclusion

This study applied Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to examine one teacher's lived experience of transformational leadership by a kiai in an Indonesian Madrasah Tsanawiyah undergoing management reform, generating three superordinate themes: an Islamic value-practice gap, in which Islamic principles were formally invoked in institutional discourse yet incompletely operationalized in relational and decision-making structures; a capacity-readiness deficit, in which structural reform was introduced ahead of the human resource preparation necessary to sustain it, producing implementation failure that was rational rather than attitudinal in character; and professional development formalism, in which institutional learning programs were experienced as certification-oriented compliance exercises rather than substantive supports for teacher professional identity. Together, these themes converge on a central finding: theological commitment at the leadership level does not, by itself, produce Islamic value enactment at the organizational level - effective realization of Islamic principles in educational institutions requires deliberate structural enablers, including participatory governance mechanisms, sequenced capacity building, and professionally relevant learning programs. These findings challenge leader-centric models in Islamic educational leadership scholarship and establish a phenomenologically grounded basis for more structurally attentive theoretical frameworks in the field.

## Author Contributions

All authors have equal contributions to the paper. All the authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

## Funding

No funding support was received.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/ or publication of this article.

## Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/ or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

## Declaration on AI Use

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

## References

- Abdurrahman, Baharuddin, & Hady, M. S. (2025). Change management strategies for enhancing education quality at Islamic boarding school. *Al-Ishlah: Jurnal Pendidikan*, 17(1), 930–941. <https://doi.org/10.35445/alishlah.v17i1.6009>
- Adeoye-Olatunde, O. A., & Olenik, N. L. (2021). Research and scholarly methods: Semi-structured interviews. *Journal of the American College of Clinical Pharmacy*, 4(10), 1358–1367. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jac5.1441>
- Adler, R. H. (2022). Trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Journal of Human Lactation*, 38(4), 598–602. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08903344221116620>
- Ahmed, S. K. (2024). The pillars of trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Journal of Medicine, Surgery, and Public Health*, 2, 100051. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.glmedi.2024.100051>
- Aini, N. K., Ridlwan Nasir, M., & Hilmy, M. (2021). Transformational leadership of nyai: Case study in Roudlotun Nasyiin Islamic boarding school. *Journal of Women's Entrepreneurship and Education*, 2021(1–2), 164–173. <https://doi.org/10.28934/jwee21.12.pp164-173>
- Alazmi, A. A., & Bush, T. (2024). An Islamic-oriented educational leadership model: Towards a new theory of school leadership in Muslim societies. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 56(3), 312–334. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2023.2292573>
- Amatullah, T. (2024). Exploring female Muslim educational leadership in a multicultural Canadian context. *Religions*, 15(2), 215. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020215>
- Arar, K., Sawalhi, R., & Yilmaz, M. (2022). The research on Islamic-based educational leadership since 1990: An international review of empirical evidence and a future research agenda. *Religions*, 13(1), 42. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13010042>
- Brooks, M. C., & Ezzani, M. D. (2022). Islamic school leadership: Advancing a framework for critical spirituality. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 35(3), 319–336. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2021.1930265>
- Brooks, M., Brooks, J., Mutohar, A., & Taufiq, I. (2020). Principals as socio-religious curators: Progressive and conservative approaches in Islamic schools. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 58(6), 677–695. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jea-01-2020-0004>
- Ezzani, M. D., Brooks, M. C., Yang, L., & Bloom, A. (2023). Islamic school leadership and social justice: An international review of the literature. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 26(5), 745–777. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2021.2009037>
- Hartman, A., & Squires, V. (2024). Bridging perspectives: Utilizing interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to inform and enhance social interventions. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 23, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241306284>
- Ibrahim, B., Zumrah, A. R., Supardi, S., & Juhji, J. (2023). Transformational leadership and organizational commitment: Moderator role of pesantren employee job satisfaction. *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education*, 12(4), 1934–1943. <https://doi.org/10.11591/ijere.v12i4.24966>
- Karim, A., Fathurrohman, O., Muhammadun, Saripudin, W., Rahmat, D., & Mansir, F. (2023). Altruistic works, religion, and corruption: Kiais' leadership to shape anti-corruption values in pesantren. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 9(1), 2238968. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2023.2238968>
- Kosim, M., Muqoddam, F., Mubarak, F., & Laila, N. Q. (2023). The dynamics of Islamic education policies in Indonesia. *Cogent Education*, 10(1), 2172930. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2172930>
- McKim, C. (2023). Meaningful member-checking: A structured approach to member-checking. *American Journal of Qualitative Research*, 7(2), 41–52. <https://doi.org/10.29333/ajqr/12973>
- Memon, N. A., Abdalla, M., & Chown, D. (2024). Laying the foundations for Islamic teacher education. *Education Sciences*, 14(10), 1046. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14101046>
- Nii Laryeafio, M., & Ogbewe, O. C. (2023). Ethical consideration dilemma: Systematic review of ethics in qualitative data collection through interviews. *Journal of Ethics in Entrepreneurship and Technology*, 3(2), 94–110. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEET-09-2022-0014>
- Nisa, D., & Aimah, S. (2024). Strategic adaptation in Islamic education quality management: Navigating social developments for sustainable educational outcomes. *Journal of Educational Management Research*, 3(2), 154–167. <https://doi.org/10.61987/jemr.v3i2.427>
- Olmos-Vega, F. M., Stalmeijer, R. E., Varpio, L., & Kahlke, R. (2023). A practical guide to reflexivity in qualitative research: AMEE Guide No. 149. *Medical Teacher*, 45(3), 241–251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2022.2057287>
- Said, S. M., Sharif, S., & Abdullah, M. K. J. (2023). Unveiling the excellent leadership qualities and practices of principals in Islamic schools: A systematic literature review. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 22(9), 43–61. <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.22.9.3>
- Sanderse, W. (2024). Adolescents' moral self-cultivation through emulation: Implications for modelling in moral education. *Journal of Moral Education*, 53(1), 139–156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2023.2236314>

- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2022). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Staller, K. M. (2021). Big enough? Sampling in qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Social Work, 20*(4), 897–904. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14733250211024516>
- Subandi, Thoyib, M., & Fauzan, A. (2021). Pesantren-based transformational leadership: Strategies toward international superior madrasah in Indonesia. *Webology, 18*(Special Issue), 1023–1040. <https://doi.org/10.14704/WEB/V18SI05/WEB18279>
- Succarie, A. (2024). Examining the implications of Islamic teacher education and professional learning: Towards professional identity renewal in Islamic schools. *Education Sciences, 14*(11), 1192. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14111192>
- Suhid, A., Naser, M. Y. M., Ahmad, A. M., Abah, N. C., Jusoh, R., & Zaremohzzabieh, Z. (2021). Challenges and readiness of Islamic education teachers in innovative teaching and learning. *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun, 9*(2), 293–308. <https://doi.org/10.26811/peuradeun.v9i2.588>
- Tanjung, B. N. (2022). Factors affecting Islamic school teacher performance in emerging economies: A leadership perspective. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research, 2022*(101), 268–287. <https://doi.org/10.14689/ejer.2022.101.016>