
HYBRID LEADERSHIP IN HIGH-PERFORMING ISLAMIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS: TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES FROM BENGKULU, INDONESIA

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Abstract

Research on educational leadership has said little about how teachers in high-performing Islamic secondary schools understand the way principals combine leadership practices in provincial Indonesian settings. This study examined teachers' views of principals' strategies, challenges, and the interaction of instructional, transformational, and consultative elements in two Islamic secondary schools in Bengkulu Province. A qualitative multiple-case design was used. Five experienced teachers were selected purposively and interviewed through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was conducted within each school before cross-case comparison. Teachers reported four strategies across both cases: personal encouragement of Islamic practice, institutionalization of religious routines, teacher-parent collaboration, and shura in decision-making. They also identified three shared challenges related to government policy, parental expectations and time, and consistent engagement with Islamic practices, plus one school-specific challenge concerning students outside school. The findings show how teachers perceived these practices as an integrated, context-responsive leadership repertoire in faith-based schooling.

Keywords: hybrid leadership, Islamic secondary schools, shura, teachers' perspectives

Abstrak

Penelitian tentang kepemimpinan pendidikan masih terbatas dalam menjelaskan bagaimana guru di sekolah menengah Islam berkinerja tinggi memahami cara kepala sekolah memadukan berbagai praktik kepemimpinan dalam konteks daerah di Indonesia. Penelitian ini mengkaji pandangan guru mengenai strategi kepala sekolah, tantangan yang dihadapi, serta keterkaitan unsur instruksional, transformasional, dan konsultatif pada dua sekolah menengah Islam di Provinsi Bengkulu. Penelitian menggunakan desain kualitatif multikasus. Lima guru berpengalaman dipilih secara purposif dan diwawancarai melalui wawancara semi terstruktur. Analisis tematik dilakukan pada masing-masing sekolah sebelum perbandingan lintas kasus. Guru melaporkan empat strategi pada kedua kasus: dorongan personal terhadap praktik keislaman, pelembagaan rutinitas keagamaan, kolaborasi guru dan orang tua, serta shura dalam pengambilan keputusan. Mereka juga mengidentifikasi tiga tantangan bersama terkait kebijakan pemerintah, harapan orang tua dan waktu, serta konsistensi praktik keislaman, dan satu tantangan khusus sekolah terkait siswa di luar sekolah. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa guru memandang praktik tersebut sebagai repertoar kepemimpinan terpadu yang responsif terhadap konteks sekolah Islam.

Kata kunci: kepemimpinan hibrida, sekolah menengah Islam, syura, perspektif guru

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Introduction

High-performing schools in this study refer to Islamic secondary schools in Bengkulu that met three selection criteria: they demonstrated strong academic performance, held official national accreditation, and were recommended by the Regional Office of Education for inclusion in the study (Hasmirati et al., 2020; Hoy & Miskel, 2005; de Waal et al., 2025). This operational definition combines performance evidence, formal quality assurance, and external institutional recommendation, and the same criteria are reported in Table 1. As Islamic schools, they are also expected to integrate standards-driven curricular frameworks for academic excellence with core Islamic values for character building (Alghulayqah, 2022; Noer, 2023; Alazmi, 2025). In the schools considered here, this dual mandate means that leaders are accountable both to state educational authorities for curricular outcomes and to their Muslim communities for students' moral and spiritual formation.

Internationally, a growing body of research has investigated leadership strategies and challenges encountered by principals in leading high-performing Islamic schools (Alkouatli et al., 2023; Ataman et al., 2024; Armila, 2023; Hasanah & Al Ghazi, 2025; Türkoğlu et al., 2023). This body of work spans a range of national and cultural contexts, reflecting the global diversity of Islamic education itself. Alkouatli et al. (2023) and Armila (2023) reported the leadership styles of Islamic school principals in Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam, presenting student-centered and strong faith-based strategies. However, challenges remained, including demands from school boards, parents, and Muslim communities, as well as gender-based obstacles. These findings are particularly notable because they illustrate that even in well-resourced, minority-Muslim contexts such as Australia and New Zealand, principals still contend with community-level pressures that complicate the exercise of leadership authority, suggesting that such tensions may not be purely a function of resource scarcity but rather an inherent feature of leading institutions that answer to both state and community expectations. Meanwhile, Türkoğlu et al. (2023) revealed that principals in Türkiye prioritized integrating Islamic values and practices, shared school objectives, teamwork, and transparent communication, though challenges appeared in balancing Islamic values with national-standard education. The Turkish case is relevant because it shows that the tension between faith-based commitments and national education requirements is not unique to Indonesia. A recent systematic review further shows that Islamic educational leadership combines a spiritual core with administrative principles such as trustworthiness, justice, and shura, rather than functioning as a purely managerial practice (Arar et al., 2026).

In the Indonesian context, Hasanah and Al Ghazi (2025) examined teachers' perspectives on leadership regeneration in Muhammadiyah Schools in Yogyakarta, finding strategies such as continuous professional development alongside challenges including implementation inconsistencies and unequal access to development programs. This study is one of the few in the Indonesian literature to center teachers' viewpoints specifically, making it a useful comparison for examining leadership from teachers' perspectives in Bengkulu. Ataman et al. (2024) claimed that principals in many Islamic schools applied strategies that placed exemplary discipline at the forefront to build school culture, alongside humanist strategies to create genuine bonds with students. Their work suggests that discipline and relational warmth can operate together in Islamic

school leadership, a pattern that also appears in the hybrid practices reported by teachers in the present study.

Research on school leadership increasingly challenges an either-or distinction between transformational and instructional leadership. Reviews and empirical studies show that these approaches can complement one another, with their effects depending on context and on how principals connect relational influence with instructional work (Bellibaş et al., 2021; Daniëls et al., 2019; Day et al., 2016; Kwan, 2020). However, this integrated leadership literature has largely developed in mainstream school systems and has paid less attention to faith-based settings in which religious values and consultative norms are part of everyday governance. The gap is therefore not whether leadership styles can be combined, but how this combination is experienced and enacted in high-performing Islamic schools when principals must respond to both state curricular requirements and religious institutional commitments. A second gap is geographical. Leadership in high-performing Islamic secondary schools in Bengkulu Province remains underexplored. The present study addresses this geographical gap by examining leadership practice in two Islamic secondary schools in Bengkulu.

Moreover, relatively little research has explored this phenomenon through the lens of teachers' perspectives, even though teachers are the primary agents responsible for enacting educational policies and leadership practices in day-to-day professional contexts. Principals may articulate a vision, but it is teachers who operationalize that vision each morning in the classroom, in hallway interactions with students, and in communication with parents; their interpretation of leadership strategies therefore captures dimensions of practice that a principal's own self-report, or a purely document-based analysis of school policy, would likely miss. Such data remain particularly scarce within the Indonesian literature, especially in provincial contexts such as Bengkulu.

This research is guided by three objectives: (1) to identify the leadership strategies employed by principals of high-performing Islamic secondary schools in Bengkulu Province from teachers' perspectives; (2) to identify the challenges faced by these principals from teachers' perspectives; and (3) to examine how these strategies reflect an integrated configuration of transformational, instructional, and shura-based consultative leadership in response to the dual demands of state curricular standards and faith-based institutional missions.

Effective principal leadership serves as a critical catalyst for the development of Islamic schools that nurture students who excel academically while embodying Islamic values and character (Alazmi, 2025; Noer, 2023; Shulhan, 2018; Siregar, 2023). International evidence also suggests that successful principals do not rely on one fixed style; they adapt a common set of leadership practices to the needs of their schools (Leithwood et al., 2020). In the schools studied here, the principal was expected to model, not merely administer, the values the school sought to instill, a pattern reflected in teachers' accounts of principals' personal religious example. By foregrounding teachers' emic perspectives, this research seeks to address both the conceptual gap (how leadership styles combine in practice) and the geographical gap (the underexplored Bengkulu context) identified above, contributing a more nuanced, context-responsive understanding of how Islamic school leadership is enacted and perceived at the school level. In doing so, it also contributes to a broader theoretical conversation about whether Western-derived leadership typologies can adequately capture leadership practice in faith-based, non-Western institutional settings, or

whether such settings require frameworks that are more explicitly attentive to local religious and cultural logics. This question is revisited in the discussion of shura and its conceptual boundary with democratic leadership. Recent Indonesian research also shows that Islamic pedagogic models can shape leadership practice, including more deliberative and transformative forms of decision-making (Supriyono et al., 2025).

Method

This research adopted a qualitative approach, chosen for its capacity to provide an in-depth, context-sensitive exploration of participants' perspectives. A qualitative approach was considered particularly well-suited to this study's aims because leadership, as experienced and interpreted by teachers, is not easily reducible to standardized survey items; rather, it is embedded in specific episodes, routines, and relationships that are best captured through participants' own narrative accounts. The study used a multiple-case study design, with each school treated as a distinct case. This design was chosen because it allows patterns to be compared across cases while providing flexibility throughout data collection, analysis, and presentation of findings (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2018). The multiple-case approach was especially useful because it allowed the researchers to identify patterns shared across the two schools while preserving case-specific differences, without treating the cases as statistically representative of Islamic schools in the region.

The research followed four procedural steps adapted from Creswell (2014): data organization (transcribing and arranging interviews by school and participant code), data screening (cleaning transcripts of vocal disfluencies while preserving meaning), data analysis (within-case examination followed by cross-case comparison), and data presentation (thematic organization reported through participants' direct statements). Each of these steps was documented in a research log maintained by the research team, allowing for an auditable trail from raw transcript to final thematic presentation, which supports the trustworthiness of the analytic process even within the qualitative, interpretive paradigm adopted here.

This research used purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) to select high-performing Islamic secondary schools in Bengkulu Province and information-rich teachers at each school, based on the criteria in table 1.

Table 1. Criteria for the Schools and Participants

Criteria for Schools	Criteria for Participants
Islamic secondary schools demonstrating high academic performance in Bengkulu	Teachers recommended by the school principals
Officially accredited under the national accreditation standard	Showcased outstanding professional performance
Recommended by the Regional Office of Education for inclusion in the study	Engaged in leadership and management activities within their schools
Included only after voluntary agreement to participate	Had at least 5 years of teaching experience at their current school
	Took part in this research voluntarily

These dual sets of criteria were designed to work in tandem: the school-level criteria ensured that the study focused specifically on institutions meeting the definition of "high-performing" articulated in the Introduction, while the participant-level criteria ensured that the teachers

interviewed were positioned to speak knowledgeably about leadership practice, both because of their tenure at the school and because of their own involvement in leadership-adjacent activities.

Two schools were selected and are referred to throughout as School 1 and School 2 to protect institutional identity. All teachers were assigned anonymized codes indicating school and sequence: S1T1, S1T2 (School 1); S2T1, S2T2, S2T3 (School 2). No real names of institutions or informants are used anywhere in this manuscript. The sample of teachers was considered adequate based on the principle of information power (Malterud et al., 2016), given the narrow and specific study aim, participants' extensive relevant experience, and the use of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Information power, rather than sample size alone, was used as the guiding criterion because the study focused on leadership strategies and challenges within two well-defined institutional cases and the participants held directly relevant experience through their tenure and involvement in leadership-related activities. The interviews were designed to elicit detailed accounts rather than brief responses. Sample adequacy was therefore judged primarily through information power rather than a numerical saturation threshold.

Because participating teachers were recommended by the school principals whose leadership was being evaluated, this recruitment route carries a risk of selection bias toward favorable views. This is an important methodological caveat: principals, in recommending which teachers to interview, may have consciously or unconsciously selected individuals whose views of their leadership were likely to be positive, and the researchers explicitly acknowledge that this cannot be entirely ruled out despite the mitigation steps described below. To mitigate this, participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and would not be shared with the school principals in any identifiable form, and interviews were conducted in a private room away from the principals' presence to encourage candid responses. Participants were also explicitly informed that they were free to express critical views without consequence to their employment. Indeed, the presence of clearly articulated challenges and critical observations in the data including comments about colleagues' inconsistent engagement with Islamic practices and specific institutional difficulties offers some indirect evidence that participants did not simply provide uniformly favorable accounts, though this does not fully eliminate the underlying risk of selection bias. This recruitment procedure nonetheless remains a limitation, revisited in the Discussion.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, enabling a deep, thorough examination of the topic (Denny & Weckesser, 2022). The semi-structured format was chosen specifically because it balances the need for comparability across interviews achieved through a common set of core questions with the flexibility to pursue unexpected or particularly rich lines of inquiry as they emerged in each conversation. The researchers prepared an interview guide of 21 core questions covering principals' leadership strategies and challenges, supplemented by follow-up probing questions. All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, the participants' first language, to ensure natural and comfortable expression. Conducting interviews in participants' first language was considered essential given the sensitive and personally reflective nature of some of the topics discussed, including participants' own religious practice and their candid assessments of colleagues and school leadership; requiring participants to respond in a second language could plausibly have constrained the depth and nuance of their accounts. The resulting transcripts were analyzed in the original language, and only the excerpts selected for presentation in this paper were translated into English by the researchers; back-translation was performed by a bilingual colleague

with a background in English education, independent from the research team, to preserve the intended meaning of participants' statements. This back-translation step served as a quality check against inadvertent shifts in meaning or tone introduced during the initial translation, a common risk in cross-language qualitative reporting. Each interview session lasted approximately 30 minutes, balancing predetermined and follow-up questions, and was recorded on the researchers' smartphones with participants' consent. Transcripts were shared with participants afterward for member checking. Member checking allowed participants to confirm, clarify, or correct the researchers' rendering of their statements, further strengthening the credibility of the data before it entered the analytic phase. Interviews were conducted between March and April 2026, in accordance with teachers' availability and working hours.

This research applied thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The analysis was inductive at the level of codes and subthemes, while the two broad organizing domains, leadership strategies and leadership challenges, followed the research objectives. No coding categories were imposed from transformational, instructional, or democratic leadership theory. Those frameworks were introduced only after the initial coding and theme development, in the Discussion, as interpretive lenses. The six phases were: (1) familiarizing with the data through repeated reading; (2) generating initial codes from recurring words, ideas, and experiences; (3) searching for candidate themes representing broader patterns; (4) reviewing themes against the coded data and full dataset; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report. Analysis was conducted separately for each school before cross-case comparison so that patterns in one case did not prematurely shape interpretation of the other.

Ethical approval was obtained before data collection under approval number 0120/EC/II/2026. Before data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality protections, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Informed consent covered both participation and audio recording. All data were stored securely and identified only by the participant codes described above.

Results and Discussion

Results

Leadership Strategies

Across the two cases, teachers described four strategies that were reported in both schools. Taken together, these four strategies suggest that principals in both schools operated not through a single, uniform leadership technique but through a coordinated set of practices spanning the personal, structural, relational, and decisional dimensions of school life, a pattern examined more closely in the Discussion below. Nurturing Islamic values on a personal level. This first strategy centers on the principal's direct, individualized encouragement of religious practice among teachers, often delivered through informal, relational channels rather than formal institutional mandates. Teachers from School 1 explained:

"We try to make Dhuha prayer a natural part of our daily routine because it's a habit we want to instill." (S1T1)

"His ideas and collaboration, especially in improving our worship, are remarkable. He often gives us advice and motivates us, so whenever we reach a point of laziness in doing prayer, he always encourages us." (S1T2)

Teachers from School 2 reported similarly, though with somewhat greater emphasis on the frequency and channel of the principal's encouragement:

"Even though his background is as a physical education teacher, he plays a very important role in giving religious advice." (S2T1)

"He always reminds us that we must become closer to Allah." (S2T1)

"Every night he reminds us, through the WhatsApp group, to perform Tahajjud prayer." (S2T1)

"Every early morning there is always a message saying, 'In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful, let's perform Tahajjud.' Every Monday and Thursday we are reminded to have sahur." (S2T2)

"Some teachers who previously never performed Tahajjud have now become diligent in performing it." (S2T2)

Notably, S2T1's observation that the principal's religious guidance was effective despite or perhaps because of his non-religious educational background (physical education) suggests that teachers did not necessarily attribute this leadership function to formal religious credentials, but rather to the principal's consistent personal example and initiative. S2T2's account of the WhatsApp-mediated reminders further illustrates how principals in this study leveraged everyday digital communication channels to sustain a continuous, low-friction presence of religious encouragement in teachers' daily lives, extending the reach of personal nurturing well beyond the physical boundaries of the school compound.

Institutionalizing Islamic practices into school programs. Whereas the first strategy operates primarily through informal encouragement, this second strategy reflects the translation of religious values into formal, structural school policy. S1T1 described how the daily schedule was restructured:

"Every school day, we begin our morning routine as soon as everyone arrives at school. Students are expected to be at school by 7:10 a.m., and we do not start classroom instruction immediately. At 7:10 a.m., we begin the Dhuha prayer. Anyone who arrives late simply misses it. After the Dhuha prayer, we continue with Qur'an recitation (Tadarus) together in the mosque, and only then do we begin classroom learning at around 7:30 a.m." (S1T1)

This account is notable for its procedural specificity: the fixed 7:10 a.m. arrival deadline, the explicit consequence for lateness (missing the prayer), and the sequential structuring of the entire morning (prayer, then Tadarus, then classroom instruction) together indicate that this is not merely an encouraged practice but a codified institutional rule embedded directly into the operational rhythm of the school day. In School 2, S2T2 described a different institutionalized program, oriented toward community engagement rather than the internal school schedule:

"During Eid al-Adha, everyone in the surrounding community receives the Qurban meat distribution." (S2T2)

This example illustrates that institutionalization in the Islamic school context is not limited to internal academic scheduling but can also extend outward, formally embedding the school within the religious and social life of its surrounding community.

Encouraging teacher-parent collaboration. S1T1 explained:

"The principal established communication between the homeroom teacher and the parents, since every activity is communicated through the parents' group chat in WhatsApp with the homeroom teacher, including various school activities." (S1T1)

S2T3 described a different form of collaboration, framed less around communication logistics and more around shared normative expectations:

"The principals and the teachers have reached a mutual agreement with the parents. Since this is an Islamic school, we follow Islamic principles and regulations in the way the school is run." (S2T3)

Read together, these two accounts suggest that teacher-parent collaboration in these schools operates on two distinct but complementary levels: an operational level, concerned with the practical logistics of communicating school activities, and a normative level, concerned with securing parents' agreement to the Islamic principles that govern the school's conduct. Both levels appear necessary: operational communication alone, without normative buy-in, would risk parents disengaging from or resisting school expectations, while normative agreement alone, without operational communication, would risk parents feeling uninformed about specific activities and decisions.

Practicing shura (consultative decision-making). S1T1 stated:

"Whenever a decision is made, it is done through consultation (shura). As I mentioned earlier, he delegates responsibilities across different levels within the school. Therefore, before any decision is made, we first discuss it together." (S1T1)

S2T2 described the process in more detail, offering a step-by-step account of how consultation unfolds in practice:

"Whenever a decision is made, there is a process that, in Sekolah Islam Terpadu (SIT, Integrated Islamic Schools), we refer to as shura, or mutual consultation. The leadership team first discusses the issue among themselves and reaches a decision before communicating it to us. If there are differing opinions, we are given the opportunity to explain our reasons, provide input, offer criticism and suggestions, and then continue the discussion until we arrive at a better solution." (S2T2)

S2T2's account is analytically significant because it reveals a specific sequencing of authority within the shura process: the leadership team first arrives at a preliminary position internally, and only then opens that position to teacher input, criticism, and revision. This sequencing, discussed further in the Discussion below, has direct implications for how shura should be conceptually distinguished from fully democratic, authority-sharing models of decision-making.

Challenges

Three challenges were reported consistently across both schools, alongside one school-specific challenge. As with the strategies above, the specific manifestations of each shared challenge differed somewhat between the two schools, reflecting each institution's particular circumstances even as the underlying challenge category remained common to both. *Adapting to government policies and programs*. S1T2 explained:

"Competition has become more intense after the government's policy. Public senior high schools increase their admission quotas every year without limitation. We've experienced some decline. As of today, our student enrollment has decreased quite a bit." (S1T2)

This account frames the challenge primarily in competitive, enrollment-related terms: expanding public-school capacity, driven by government policy, directly threatens the private Islamic school's student base. S2T1 and S2T2 described a different form of adaptation, centered less on enrollment competition and more on implementing government programs within the school:

"Here, we also have to adapt. We have to find ways to ensure that the government's programs are implemented well in our school." (S2T1)

"Another challenge has emerged with the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program. Because of this program, there is more waste. Some students still require our attention because they sometimes dispose of their trash carelessly." (S2T2)

"Another challenge arises when the national curriculum changes. Such changes automatically require adjustments to the distinctive characteristics of the SIT curriculum. For example, the quality standards book was recently updated from version 4.0 to 5.0. As a result, further adjustments are necessary, requiring teachers to adapt their teaching practices while students must also adjust to the new changes." (S2T2)

S2T2's remarks are particularly notable because they identify two distinct sub-challenges within the broader category of government-policy adaptation: an operational sub-challenge (managing the practical, on-the-ground effects of a new national program, such as increased waste from the meal program) and a curricular sub-challenge (reconciling updates to national curriculum standards with the school's own distinctive Islamic curricular framework, evidenced by the concrete detail of the "quality standards book" updating from version 4.0 to 5.0). This latter point echoes, in very concrete institutional terms, the broader dual-accountability tension identified in the Introduction between state curricular standards and faith-based institutional missions. Managing time constraints and parental expectations. S1T1 stated:

"Sometimes we encounter some difficulties involving parents when we invite them to attend school activities. Many of them live outside the area, so it can be challenging for them to come. However, the parents who have entrusted their children to us generally make an effort to attend when invited. The main challenge is finding a suitable time that works for everyone." (S1T1)

This account frames the challenge primarily around logistical scheduling difficulties related to families living outside the area. S2T1 and S2T3 described a different manifestation, centered less

on scheduling logistics and more on the substantive content of parental expectations and complaints:

"There is a challenge in dealing with parents. Since this is a private Islamic school, parents have both rights and responsibilities. As a result, when something does not meet their expectations, they directly complain to the principal." (S2T1)

"One of the challenges relates to communication with parents. Since we are a private school, parents often expect their children to become religious and have strong moral character." (S2T3)

Both S2T1 and S2T3 link this challenge to the school's private status, where parents expected direct communication and visible attention to their children's religious and moral development. Sustaining consistent engagement with Islamic practices. S1T1 said:

"Some teachers are indifferent; not everyone is willing to follow the encouragement from the principals to implement Islamic practices. However, with the principal's enthusiasm and patience, he can get through it." (S1T1)

This account locates the challenge specifically within the teaching staff itself, describing variable levels of buy-in to the principal's religious encouragement. S2T2 raised a related but distinct concern, shifting the locus of the challenge from teachers to students:

"The challenge is the students because they are adolescents. According to parenting experts, once they are over the age of 15, it is very difficult to help them apply Islamic values within their character." (S2T2)

S2T2 used a developmental explanation to describe this difficulty. Because the claim was expressed by the participant rather than independently examined in this study, it is treated here as part of the teacher's interpretation of the challenge.

School-specific challenge: limitations in monitoring students outside school (School 2 only). S2T3 explained:

"At school, we make sure that the students perform their prayers properly. However, when they are at home, that responsibility ultimately rests with their parents. This is indeed one of the greatest challenges." (S2T3)

This concern was not raised by teachers from School 1 and is therefore reported as a case-specific finding rather than a pattern shared across both schools. The concern is notable for how explicitly it identifies the boundary of the school's institutional reach: whatever structural and relational strategies the school deploys to sustain Islamic practice on campus, teachers at School 2 recognized that this influence necessarily attenuates once students return home, at which point responsibility shifts to the family, a domain over which the school has, at best, indirect influence.

Overlap Between Strategies

Teachers' accounts also indicated that the same strategy could serve more than one function at once. In the shura excerpts above, S2T2's description shows the leadership team both consulting teachers on decisions (a structural, decision-making function) and, in S1T1's account, framing this consultation as an extension of the principal's ongoing personal motivation and delegation of

responsibility (a relational, motivational function). Similarly, in the excerpts on institutionalized practice, S1T1 described the Dhuha-prayer schedule both as a fixed operational rule (attendance cut-off at 7:10 a.m.) and, in the accounts under personal-level nurturing, as something teachers experienced through the principal's ongoing encouragement rather than through the rule alone. Teachers did not describe these as separate, sequential strategies but as intertwined aspects of the same everyday leadership practices. This pattern of overlap is, in fact, the empirical foundation for the study's central conceptual claim developed at length in the Discussion below that leadership in these schools is better understood as a single, blended repertoire than as a set of discrete strategies that a principal selects between depending on the situation at hand.

Discussion

Strategies as a Hybrid, Not Separate, Repertoire

The two strategies of nurturing personal spiritual development and institutionalizing Islamic practices indicate that principals worked at interpersonal and structural levels at the same time. Teachers described direct encouragement, personal example, and moral motivation, which are consistent with the relational dimension of transformational leadership (Burns, 1978). At the same time, School 1's principal embedded Dhuha prayer and Qur'an recitation in the daily timetable, a structural practice that shaped the organization of the school day and the conditions surrounding classroom instruction (Hallinger, 2003). The evidence here concerns the organization of instructional time rather than direct supervision of teaching. The broader pattern is consistent with research showing that successful principals often combine transformational and instructional strategies in context-sensitive ways rather than treating them as competing approaches (Bellibaş et al., 2021; Day et al., 2016; Kwan, 2020). In these two schools, however, the combination was shaped by a religious mission. The fixed schedule, consequences for lateness, and sequence of prayer, recitation, and classroom instruction show how Islamic practice became part of the school's operational structure. Compared with studies that describe value integration mainly in cultural terms (Türkoğlu et al., 2023), these accounts provide a concrete example of how religious commitments can be built into everyday organizational routines.

The teacher-parent collaboration strategy can be read alongside research showing that parent-school relationships shape students' academic and developmental experiences, although the form and effects of involvement vary across contexts (Schejter-Cohen et al., 2026; Addi-Raccah & Ainhoren, 2009; Horvat et al., 2010; Pomerantz et al., 2007). Sibanda (2021) likewise contrasts cooperative parent-teacher relationships with arrangements in which parents are treated mainly as passive recipients of school decisions. In the present study, S1T1 described an active WhatsApp communication channel between homeroom teachers and parents, while S2T3 described a "mutual agreement" on the school's Islamic principles. These accounts show collaboration at both operational and normative levels. Teachers also linked this collaboration to the principals' relational role. In this sense, teacher-parent collaboration functions as a relational strategy turned outward, extending the principals' interpersonal leadership beyond teachers to the wider school community.

Challenges in Comparative Perspective

The first cross-case challenge, adaptation to government policies and programs, is consistent with Türkoğlu et al. (2023), who described the difficulty of aligning Islamic school priorities with national education requirements. In the present study, the issue appeared in concrete forms: schools had to adjust to curriculum changes and manage the local effects of new government programs. Teachers did not describe resistance to the policies themselves; their concern was the practical work of fitting external requirements into existing school routines. This suggests that policy adaptation in Islamic schools involves not only formal compliance but also the translation of national initiatives into established school practices.

The second challenge, time constraints and parental expectations, had both logistical and substantive dimensions. In School 1, the difficulty was finding a time when parents living outside the area could attend school activities. In School 2, teachers emphasized complaints and expectations concerning students' religious and moral development. Alkoutli et al. (2023) similarly found that Islamic school leaders in Australia and New Zealand had to negotiate expectations from parents, school boards, and wider Muslim communities. The comparison suggests that managing parental expectations may be a recurring part of Islamic school leadership, although the form it takes depends on context. In the present cases, the issue also points to the limits of what schools can influence when religious and moral development is shared with families.

The third challenge, variation in consistency and engagement with Islamic practice, aligns with findings that some teachers treat religious routines as formal obligation rather than internalized spiritual process, and that sustaining Islamic school culture is an ongoing process requiring consistency and collective commitment rather than a one-time initiative (Ahmad et al., 2025). S1T1's observation that "some teachers are indifferent" while others require the principal's sustained "enthusiasm and patience" to bring along captures precisely this distinction between routine compliance and internalized commitment and underscores that culture-building of this kind cannot be achieved through a single institutional announcement or policy but requires ongoing, patient leadership investment over time.

The school-specific concern about oversight beyond school grounds resonates with broader literature on the necessity of school-family partnership in sustaining children's academic and religious development (Schejter-Cohen et al., 2026; Addi-Raccah & Ainhoren, 2009; Horvat et al., 2010; Pomerantz et al., 2007), including research on Islamic school-family partnerships specifically noting that such collaboration can be constrained by parents' time limitations and varying religious literacy within the family (Ubaidillah et al., 2026). This literature helps contextualize S2T3's concern that once students leave school grounds, the responsibility for ensuring continued religious practice such as performing daily prayers passes to parents, whose capacity and consistency in fulfilling that role cannot be guaranteed or directly monitored by the school. Because this concern was raised only in School 2, whether it reflects a genuine difference in family-engagement practices between the two schools, or simply a topic that happened to surface in the school 2 interviews, cannot be determined from the present data. This ambiguity is explicitly flagged here as a boundary of what the current study's design permits the researchers to claim and is revisited as a direction for future research in the Conclusion.

Shura and the Boundary with Democratic Leadership

The decision-making process described by S2T2 is better understood as consultative rather than fully democratic. The leadership team first formed a preliminary position, but teachers were then given room to question, criticize, and suggest alternatives before a final decision was reached. Authority therefore remained with the leadership team, while consultation was built into the process. This distinction matters because shura has a normative basis that is not identical to democratic leadership. Islamic educational leadership literature identifies shura as a core administrative principle grounded in religious responsibility and ethical governance (Arar et al., 2026). Recent work in Indonesian Islamic education also shows that deliberative decision-making can emerge from pedagogic models that support dialogue and more balanced power relations (Supriyono et al., 2025). Democratic leadership, by contrast, is usually discussed in terms of participation and the sharing of organizational authority (Northouse, 2018). The observable practices may overlap, but their justificatory foundations are different. In this study, shura-based consultation gave teachers a structured voice without removing the leadership team's formal responsibility for the final decision. This helps explain why the practice showed democratic-like features while remaining embedded in an Islamic leadership framework.

Taken together, these findings help clarify both the contribution of the study and the boundaries within which its interpretation should be understood. This study does not present integrated leadership as a wholly new idea. Rather, it extends existing work by showing how relational, instructional, and consultative practices were combined within two faith-based schools (Bellibaş et al., 2021; Day et al., 2016; Kwan, 2020). Its main conceptual contribution lies in showing that shura adds a distinct normative basis to this combination. Consultation was not merely used as a management technique, but was understood as part of responsible leadership grounded in the schools' religious values (Arar et al., 2026). Empirically, the study adds evidence from Bengkulu Province, a context that remains less visible in the international literature on Islamic school leadership. It also demonstrates the value of teachers' perspectives in revealing how personal encouragement, school routines, parent communication, and consultative decision-making overlap in everyday leadership practice.

These findings should nevertheless be interpreted within the limits of the study. The analysis is based on five teachers from two schools in one province and should therefore be understood as context-specific rather than representative of Islamic secondary schools in Bengkulu or Indonesia more broadly. In addition, the participants were recommended by the principals whose leadership was being discussed, which may have introduced a degree of selection bias despite the confidentiality measures used during data collection. The study also relied solely on teachers' accounts and did not include principals', students', or parents' perspectives or direct observation of school practices. As a result, the reported strategies reflect teachers' perceptions and cannot be independently verified as consistently enacted across settings. These limitations set reasonable boundaries on how far the identified hybrid leadership pattern can be extended beyond the two cases examined.

Conclusion

In relation to the first objective, teachers reported that principals employed four consistent strategies across both schools: nurturing individual spiritual development, institutionalizing Islamic practices through school programs, fostering teacher-parent collaboration, and practicing shura as consultative decision-making. These four strategies, while analytically distinguishable for the purposes of presentation, were shown in the findings to overlap substantially in practice, jointly constituting what this study characterizes as a hybrid leadership repertoire rather than a set of discrete, independently applied techniques.

In relation to the second objective, teachers identified three shared challenges: adapting to shifting government policies, managing time constraints and parental expectations, and sustaining consistent engagement with Islamic practices, alongside one school-specific challenge concerning oversight of students' Islamic practice outside school. These challenges collectively illustrate the structural position of Islamic secondary schools as institutions operating at the intersection of state regulatory demands, market-like competitive pressure from public schools, parental and community expectations, and the practical limits of the school's influence once students leave its physical grounds.

In relation to the third objective, the findings suggest that these strategies were not enacted as separate, alternative leadership styles but as an integrated repertoire combining transformational, instructional, and shura-based consultative elements in response to the dual demands of state curricular standards and faith-based institutional missions. This extends rather than replaces existing integrated leadership scholarship: the contribution lies in showing how these elements were combined within a faith-based setting and how shura provided a distinct normative basis for consultation.

Teachers described these strategies as contributing to a stronger, more consistently lived Islamic school culture, though this study did not directly measure organizational effectiveness or academic outcomes, and such claims should be understood as teachers' perceptions rather than demonstrated effects. This distinction between perceived contribution and measured effect is important to preserve: the qualitative, interview-based design of this study is well suited to capturing how leadership is experienced and interpreted by teachers, but it does not, by itself, establish a causal or even a strongly correlational link between the specific leadership strategies documented here and any independently measured indicator of school or student performance.

Future research could address this study's limitations by incorporating principals', students', and parents' perspectives or direct observation of school practices; by examining a larger and more geographically diverse sample of Islamic schools; and by further investigating whether the school-specific challenge identified in School 2 reflects a genuine difference in family-engagement practices or a broader, underreported pattern. Additional avenues for future work suggested by the present findings include a closer examination of how digital communication channels, such as the WhatsApp-based reminders and parent group chats described by several teachers in this study, are reshaping the practical mechanics of both personal spiritual nurturing and teacher-parent collaboration in Islamic schools; a longitudinal design that could track how newly institutionalized practices, such as restructured morning schedules, evolve or face erosion over time; and comparative work examining whether the specific hybrid configuration of strategies identified here in Bengkulu

is similarly present, or takes a different shape, in high-performing Islamic schools located in more urbanized Indonesian provinces. For practitioners, principals and school foundations in similar Islamic school settings may consider that sustaining an Islamic school culture depends not only on personal religious encouragement but on embedding religious practice into the formal structure of the school day, and on maintaining active, though variably structured, engagement with parents. Relatedly, the findings on shura suggest that principals in comparable settings may benefit from treating structured, staged consultation in which a leadership team first deliberates internally before opening its preliminary position to staff input as a deliberate and replicable leadership technique in its own right, rather than as an incidental byproduct of good relational leadership.

Declarations

RPB contributed to the conceptualisation, research design, data collection, data analysis, and preparation of the original draft. AR contributed to methodological development and manuscript review. CDH contributed to data organisation and analysis. K contributed to conceptual refinement and research supervision. YN contributed to academic review and language refinement. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript. The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this study. Generative Artificial Intelligence, specifically ChatGPT by OpenAI, was used only to support language editing, readability, and reference-format checking. It was not used to generate research data, conduct interviews, perform qualitative analysis, determine themes, interpret findings, or formulate scientific conclusions. All substantive decisions and final scholarly judgments remained the responsibility of the authors. Ethical approval was obtained before data collection under approval number 0120/EC/II/2026. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained through anonymisation and participant coding. The qualitative data supporting the findings are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to appropriate ethical and confidentiality safeguards.

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