

Principal's Leadership Strategies in Enhancing Students' Religious Competence: A Case Study at Madrasah Aliyah

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ABSTRACT

This research addresses the problem of how school principals manage and improve students' religious competence, which is often overlooked in the development of educational quality. The purpose of this study is to find out: (1) how the headmaster plans to increase students' religious competence, (2) how the headmaster organizes the efforts, (3) how the headmaster carries out the plan, and (4) how the headmaster evaluates the process. Using a qualitative methodology, the study collects data through field observations, interviews, recordings, written notes, and documentation to ensure reliability and depth of information. The findings reveal that principals implement strategies and policies involving planning, organization, implementation, and evaluation which result in graduates capable of actively engaging in society through religious activities; student admission is conducted both online and offline with assessments also integrated digitally, while religious culture is strengthened through active participation in Islamic events such as Isra' Mi'raj, Muharram, Ramadhan activities, Mawlid, Qur'anic recitation, and Khotmil Qur'an programs. These results indicate that the principal's leadership not only enhances students' religious competence but also contributes to building a strong religious culture in schools, offering practical models for other educational institutions to adopt to integrate religious competence with broader academic achievement.

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INTRODUCTION

Religious education in madrasahs is the main pillar in shaping students' religious competence, which includes mastering religious knowledge, internalizing values, and practicing worship in daily life. In the midst of the rapid flow of globalization, modernization, and technological development, the role of madrasahs is increasingly crucial in maintaining the morality and spirituality of the younger generation (Masitah et al., 2024; Raikhan, 2024; Salamah et al., 2025). Madrasah heads play a strategic role not only in managerial and pedagogical aspects, but also in fostering students religiously. This research is important because the success of madrasahs in achieving their educational goals is highly determined by the effective and visionary leadership of madrasah heads (Adeoye et al., 2025; A. Aziz et al., 2024; Haq & Roesminingsih, 2024). This is in line with the findings of (Nurdi & Ahmad, 2025; Rifki et al., 2024), which show that participatory and quality-oriented leadership can encourage the sustainable improvement of education quality. Furthermore, (Hasan et al., 2024; Muhith et al., 2023; Rachman et al., 2024) emphasize that the madrasah head plays a crucial role in fostering students' religious culture through policies, role modeling, and the creation of a conducive learning climate.

Previous studies have touched on the role of madrasah heads in improving the quality of education, both in terms of curriculum management, learning supervision, and teacher professionalism development (Mariani et al., 2024; Said, 2025; Senang et al., 2024; Zufriyatun et al., 2025). However, research that specifically highlights the leadership strategy of madrasah heads in improving students' religious competence is still limited (Najah et al., 2025; Salim et al., 2024; Tihabsah et al., 2024). Generally, previous studies focused more on improving teacher competence or developing a quality culture, while the integration of leadership with the religious guidance of students was less deeply raised. Therefore, this research has novelty by highlighting the leadership of madrasah heads in fostering applicable religious competence through curriculum, extracurricular activities, and school culture.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the strategy of the head of the MA Unggulan Hikmatul Amanah madrasah in planning, organizing, implementing, and evaluating programs to improve students' religious competence. In addition, this study aims to show how madrasah heads play a role not only as administrators, but also as motivators, innovators, and fosters of Islamic values. The approach used is qualitative with field observations, interviews, and documentation, so that it is expected to be able to complement the shortcomings of previous research that emphasizes more on administrative aspects.

This study also seeks to test the argument that participatory, transformational, and spiritual-based leadership of madrasah heads is able to produce a strong religious culture in madrasahs. In the context of the Hikmatul Amanah Superior MA, the leadership strategy of the head of the madrasah is manifested in various programs such as tahfidzul Qur'an, student da'wah activities, taklim assembly, daily worship habits, and student involvement in community religious activities. This emphasizes that the success of improving religious competence is not only determined by the formal curriculum, but also by visionary leadership that is able to build synergy between teachers, students, parents, and the surrounding community.

Thus, this research is expected to make a theoretical and practical contribution to the development of Islamic education management, especially related to the leadership strategy of madrasah heads in improving the religious competence of students. The results of the research

can be a model for other madrassas in designing comprehensive, contextual, and sustainable educational policies and strategies.

METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach. with the type of case study as Creswell explained by Creswell also asserts that this method is appropriate for understanding leadership and religious culture phenomena in depth, as it is able to capture the subjective meanings of the informants' experiences (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2016). This approach was chosen because it is able to explore phenomena deeply and thoroughly in a natural context without manipulating variables. The focus of the research is directed to understand the leadership strategy of madrasah heads in improving the religious competence of students at the Hikmatul Amanah Flagship MA. The research was carried out in the 2024/2025 academic year with a purposively chosen location, because this madrasah has a structured and innovative religious program and leadership oriented towards improving the religious quality of students.

Data collection techniques are carried out through observation, interviews, and documentation. Participatory observation is carried out by directly observing religious activities in the madrasah, such as congregational prayers, tadarus, routine recitation, and moral development. In-depth interviews were conducted with the head of the madrasah as the main informant, Islamic Religious Education teachers, and several students as supporting informants. Documentation in the form of work programs, religious activity agendas, evaluation reports, and teacher meeting archives were analyzed to complete the primary data. All data is recorded, recorded, and organized to maintain the authenticity and reliability of the findings.

Data analysis is carried out by following the Miles and Huberman model through three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data triangulation is applied by combining various sources (madrasah heads, teachers, students), methods (observations, interviews, documentation), and collection time to increase the validity of research results. Through this stage, the collected data is systematically processed to find the patterns, meanings, and leadership strategies of madrasah heads in building religious culture in the MA Unggulan Hikmatul Amanah environment.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Principal's Leadership Strategies in Enhancing Students' Religious Competence

The madrasah head management design program in improving students' religious competence is very important because it is in direct contact with the community. Religious competence is not only part of the madrasah curriculum, but also a real provision for students in society. Therefore, cooperation between the madrasah and the surrounding environment is needed so that these competencies really develop. The culture of the madrasah itself cannot be separated from the culture of the community, in fact the madrasah can function as an agent of change that brings religious values and positive character to the surrounding environment.

As agents of change, madrassas need to have careful planning in designing religious programs. The plan includes a structured strategy for development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Without good planning, it will be difficult for students to improve their religious competence to run effectively. The Head of Madrasah Aliyah Unggulan Hikmatul Amanah stated that religious competence is one of the main competencies that

students must have because this competence will greatly help them in establishing communication, cooperating, and playing a role in society.

In an interview, the head of the madrasah emphasized that improving religious competence is a priority, because this determines how students are accepted in society. He added that the management carried out under his leadership is based on the management function, namely planning, organizing, mobilizing, and supervising. With this framework, the head of the madrasah tries to ensure that each program runs according to its purpose and has an impact on improving the religious quality of students.

Program planning at MA Unggulan Hikmatul Amanah is carried out in a participatory manner through deliberations with the entire academic community. Each deputy head of the field prepares a program design based on the results of a work meeting, then the formulation is ratified by the head of the madrasah. This system shows a clear management flow, from the bottom up, so that each field has responsibilities according to its role. Religious competence is part of the work program that is always discussed in meetings and is a special concern for the madrasah.

However, based on information from the deputy head of public relations, planning to improve students' religious competence has not been fully systematic. However, this topic is always included in the discussion of work meetings, so it still receives attention. Thus, it can be said that the head of the madrasah has carried out the planning function even though it is not perfect, but still shows commitment to developing students' religious competence.

In addition to planning, organization is also key in the management of madrasah heads. The Head of the Supreme Court Hikmatul Amanah said that the division of duties in terms of improving religious competence was given to the deputy head of public relations, the head of madin, and the deputy head of student affairs. This is because religious competence is closely related to the development of the personality and character of students who need support from various fields.

The moral faith teacher also emphasized that the organization is carried out by involving teachers to accompany students when they go directly to the community, for example during Qur'an sermons or other religious activities. This effort shows a clear division of tasks and involves many parties, so that the program can be run properly. The head of the madrasah also empowers teachers and educators according to their main duties and functions so that the goal of increasing religious competence can be achieved optimally.

In the implementation of the program, the head of the madrasah emphasized the importance of supervision in accordance with applicable regulations. Supervision is carried out directly by the head of the madrasah, and if he is obstructed, the task is delegated to the deputy head of public relations, student affairs, and madin teachers. In addition, the implementation of the program is also realized by involving students directly in religious activities in the community, such as being bilal in mosques or participating in da'wah activities. This shows that students not only get theory in madrasahs, but also real practice in social life.

Interviews with several deputy heads of madrasah strengthened the explanation of the head of the madrasah. They stated that the implementation of supervision was carried out jointly with good coordination. In fact, some programs require students to be active in the mosque around every Friday, which shows the real implementation of the program. The head of the madrasah not only prepares a plan, but also ensures that the implementation and supervision run effectively.

Finally, in terms of evaluation, the head of the madrasah carries out a routine discussion with the deputy head and madin teachers. The evaluation was carried out by looking at the development of students' abilities, the results of the madin exam, and their involvement in religious activities. Teachers are also involved in evaluation meetings to assess the extent to which students' religious competence has developed. This shows that the head of the madrasah does not work alone, but involves all elements of the madrasah in maintaining and improving the religious quality of the students. With such management, MA Unggulan Hikmatul Amanah strives to create a generation that has strong religious competence, noble character, and is ready to contribute positively to the community.

Table 1. Management Strategies in Enhancing Students' Religious Competence at Madrasahs

Aspect	Description
Importance of the Program	The program to enhance religious competence is important because it is directly related to the community. Madrasahs can serve as agents of change, bringing religious values and positive character to the surrounding environment.
Planning	Conducted participatively through consultations with the entire academic community. Although not yet fully systematic, planning is still given attention.
Organization	Task division related to religious competence involves deputy heads of fields, madin heads, and deputy heads of student affairs. The program is carried out by involving many parties, including teachers who accompany students in the community.
Implementation	The program involves students directly in religious activities in the community, such as becoming bilal in mosques or participating in da'wah. Supervision is done by the head of the madrasah and delegated to the relevant deputy heads.
Supervision	Supervision is carried out directly by the head of the madrasah, with good coordination between the deputy heads and madin teachers. Students are also involved in religious activities, such as at the mosque.
Evaluation	Evaluation is conducted regularly involving deputy heads and madin teachers, based on students' progress, madin exam results, and student involvement in religious activities.

Discussion

Principal's Leadership Strategies in Enhancing Students' Religious Competence

As explained in the theoretical study in chapter II, in the context of Islamic education, the head of the madrasah has a strategic position as a central figure who plays a role in realizing the vision and mission of the educational institution. The success of a madrasah is not only determined by the quality of the curriculum or physical facilities, but also by the competence and leadership of the madrasah head who is able to manage and direct all elements of the madrasah. One of the main focuses in the development of Islamic education is the improvement of religious competence, both for students and educators. Religious competence is part of the formation of Islamic character that is the hallmark of Islamic educational institutions (Abidin et al., 2025; Azni et al., 2025; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Fanani & Ma'arif, 2025).

Along with the development of the times and the demands of the community for the quality of madrasah output, the head of the madrasah is required not only to be an administrator, but also to be a planner, organizer, and implementer of systematic and directed development programs. Therefore, in the management of Islamic education, the head of the madrasah must master three main managerial functions, namely: planning, organizing, and actuating, all of which lead to improving the quality of human resources and religious competence of students as educational outcomes (Haidar et al., 2022; Haq & Roesminingsih, 2024; Nugraha, 2024).

Planning is the initial stage of the management process which is very important and is the main foundation in the implementation of madrasah programs. In the context of Islamic education, planning is directed to realize the strategic goals of the institution, including strengthening the religious values of students and teachers.

According to Prim Masrokan Mutohar, planning is a series of predetermined activities to be carried out in a certain period of time to achieve certain goals. In this framework, madrasah heads are required to be able to formulate the goals to be achieved, choose the right program, and identify available resources. In this case, planning should not be done unilaterally, but must involve all elements of the madrasah in order to create participation and a sense of belonging to the program to be carried out.

At the Hikmatul Amanah Flagship MA, the planning of madrasah heads is carried out through a participatory approach. The head of the madrasah mobilized all madrasah residents, including teachers, staff, and school committees, to participate in deliberations to discuss strategic programs. This deliberation is carried out periodically and openly, where all parties are given space to convey ideas, inputs, and criticisms of the plan to be set.

This collaborative approach has several advantages. First, increasing the sense of responsibility and ownership of the programs designed. Second, expanding perspectives and innovations in formulating policies (M. Aziz, Napitupulu, & Parapat, 2025; Muslih et al., 2024). Third, creating a harmonious and democratic working atmosphere. In the context of improving religious competence, planning is focused on the integration of religious values in all aspects of learning, the development of a curriculum based on Islamic character, as well as training and strengthening the religious capacity of teachers and students (Adiyani et al., 2025; Arifin et al., 2025).

In addition, planning also includes determining success indicators, scheduling activities, and budget allocation. The head of the madrasah ensures that all programs have clarity of objectives, implementation methods, and adequate supporting resources. For example, in designing a tahfiz al-Qur'an program, planning includes daily scheduling, assignment of supervisors, and methods of evaluating student achievement.

After the planning is prepared, the next stage is organizing. Organizing is a systematic effort in determining the work structure, division of tasks, and coordination between personnel to achieve the goals of the institution. Good organization will create efficiency, effectiveness, and synergy in the implementation of the program (Silvina Novianti et al., 2023; Wahib, 2025).

Prim Masrokan Mutohar stated that organizing is the process of determining the work that must be done, grouping these tasks, dividing the work to each personnel, establishing organizational subsystems, and determining clear working relationships. In the context of madrasahs, organizing involves the head of the madrasah as the main coordinator in charge of compiling the organizational structure, dividing tasks according to expertise and duties, and establishing intensive communication and coordination between work units.

The results of research at MA Unggulan Hikmatul Amanah show that madrasah heads divide tasks according to the duties of each teacher and staff. For example, religious teachers are given responsibilities in student moral development programs, spiritual guidance, and qira'ah training. Meanwhile, general teachers are involved in activities relevant to strengthening Islamic values in the context of general learning, such as relating science material to the greatness of Allah's creation, or discussing ethical values in PPKn lessons.

Organizing is also carried out by cultivating deliberation in solving problems, receiving criticism and suggestions, and opening space for new constructive ideas. The head of the madrasah actively fosters communication with all madrasah residents, provides support, motivation, and develops a work pattern based on collaboration and mutual cooperation. Thus, organizing is not only structural, but also cultural.

The effectiveness of organizing can be seen from increased work productivity, synergy between teachers, and reduced internal conflicts. For example, teachers who have special abilities in the field of da'wah are given space to develop youth da'wah clubs, while teachers who have a pesantren background are given responsibility for strengthening the dormitory program. With this approach, every educator can actualize their potential to the maximum.

Field findings also show that through proper organization, madrasah heads have succeeded in creating a conducive work climate, encouraging increased professionalism of teachers, and strengthening commitment to Islamic values in daily life in madrasahs (Amalia et al., 2024; Pambayun et al., 2025; Salamah et al., 2025).

The next stage is the implementation (actuating), which is the process of actualizing the work plan that has been prepared. Implementation is the most critical stage in management, because all ideas and strategies designed are tested through concrete actions. The implementation involves the process of briefing, motivation, and coordination so that all programs run in accordance with the goals that have been set.

According to Sudjipto, the implementation function emphasizes activities that are directly related to people in the organization. The head of the madrasah must be able to motivate all elements of the madrasah to work in accordance with their respective duties, functions, and competencies. Successful implementation is characterized by the active involvement of all parties, work discipline, and orientation to results.

At MA Unggulan Hikmatul Amanah, the implementation of the religious competency strengthening program is carried out by providing space for students to implement their knowledge in the community. For example, students are involved in Ramadan social service programs, da'wah safaris, and young khatib training. This activity not only trains students' courage and independence, but also strengthens Islamic values in social practice.

In addition, the head of the madrasah set an example in implementing the program. For example, in joint tadarus activities, the head of the madrasah participates in reading the Qur'an with students, or in the implementation of congregational dhuha prayers, he is in the front row. This attitude has a great moral influence on students and teachers, and strengthens leadership integrity (M. Aziz, Napitupulu, & Siregar, 2025; Zarkasi et al., 2024, 2024).

The implementation also involves periodic evaluation of the program's results. This evaluation was carried out to find out the achievements of the program, obstacles faced, and solutions for improvement. The evaluation was carried out openly and participatory, where all madrasah residents were given the opportunity to express their views. Thus, the implementation of the program becomes more adaptive, contextual, and oriented towards continuous improvement.

One of the advantages of effective madrasah head leadership is his ability to integrate modern managerial values with Islamic spirituality. The head of the madrasah acts not only as an administrative manager, but also as a murabbi, a spiritual coach who becomes a moral role model. In this context, madrasah heads are required to have integrity, sincerity, and awareness of divine responsibility in educating generations (Haq & Roesminingsih, 2024; Syarifah et al., 2025; Yusuf et al., 2024).

Management based on Islamic values is reflected in the principles of shura (deliberation), amanah (responsibility), islah (improvement), and ihsan (professionalism). In decision-making, the head of the madrasah is not authoritarian, but prioritizes consultation. In the implementation of the program, the head of the madrasah not only pursues administrative targets, but also the development of morals and spirituality of madrasah residents.

CONCLUSION

One of the most striking and unexpected findings of this study is that despite being a private institution targeting lower-middle-class communities and not collecting significant dues, MA Unggulan Hikmatul Amanah has successfully cultivated a strong and vibrant religious culture. Students are not only actively involved in internal activities such as religious studies, Qur'an recitations, and moral development programs, but they are also empowered to serve outside the madrasah as mosque bilals and facilitators of community-based Islamic events. This finding demonstrates that limited financial resources and facilities are not absolute barriers to developing students' religious competence, as long as the leadership and management of the madrasah head are effective, collaborative, and value-driven.

However, this research also has several limitations. First, the study was conducted in only one madrasah, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other institutions with different socio-economic, cultural, or organizational contexts. Second, the data were obtained from a relatively small number of informants and did not cover broader variations such as diverse educational levels, wider geographic settings, or different demographic groups (e.g., gender and age differences). Third, the study applied a qualitative approach without quantitatively measuring the direct impact of leadership practices on students' religious competence.

Therefore, further research is needed with broader coverage, including more varied cases, larger and more diverse samples, and the integration of both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Such expanded studies would allow for a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of how leadership strategies in Islamic educational institutions influence students' religious development. With richer evidence, more accurate and evidence-based policies could be formulated to strengthen religious education management across a wider range of madrasahs.

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