

Transformational Leadership in Islamic Boarding School Character Education Based on Teachers' Phenomenological Perspectives

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Abstract: This qualitative phenomenological study investigates transformational leadership practices in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) through the lens of teachers' lived experiences. The research was conducted at Pesantren X with six experienced teachers serving as primary participants through purposive sampling. Data were collected via in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis with ATLAS.ti version 24 software. The study identifies four major themes: (1) Presence as Pedagogy, whereby leaders cultivate spiritual transformation through active participation in daily religious rituals and consistent physical supervision; (2) Accessible Authority, demonstrating how leaders balance traditional Islamic authority with democratic accessibility mechanisms; (3) Value Transmission Through Practical Responsibility, showing how students develop character virtues (amanah, integrity, and trustworthiness) through authentic management responsibilities; and (4) Restorative-Investigative Conflict Resolution, integrating Islamic justice principles (musyawarah and collective learning) with contemporary restorative practices. Findings reveal that transformational leadership in pesantren operates distinctly from Western organizational models, emphasizing relational presence, moral exemplarity, and communal value-formation. This study provides culturally-grounded empirical evidence enriching transformational leadership theory within Islamic educational contexts, offering actionable insights for pesantren administrators and informing educational policy development in Indonesian secondary education.

Keywords: transformational leadership; Islamic boarding school; character education; pesantren; teacher perspectives

Pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) represent one of the most significant yet under-researched educational institutions in Southeast Asia. Unlike secular schools, pesantren integrate religious education, character formation, and academic instruction within a holistic framework rooted in Islamic principles of tarbiyah (comprehensive education), ta'dib (ethical cultivation), and uswah hasanah (exemplary conduct). In contemporary Indonesia, pesantren face unprecedented pressures from rapid digitalization, competing academic standards, and generational shifts that challenge their capacity to maintain traditional religious authenticity while adapting to modernity's demands. Within this context, leadership practices significantly determine institutional sustainability and the quality of character education that pesantren provide. Research

on pesantren leadership specifically emphasizing character education remains fragmented, with few studies examining how leaders navigate tensions between traditional Islamic pedagogy and contemporary educational demand.

Pesantren X, located in Pandeglang, Banten, exemplifies these tensions. As a traditional Islamic boarding institution with over a century of history, Pesantren X has maintained a commitment to prophetic educational values while navigating demands for institutional modernization. The pesantren currently serves over 800 students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds across multiple provinces, with 45 faculty members implementing both traditional Islamic curriculum and state-mandated academic standards. This unique context—balancing heritage preservation with innovation, serving economically disadvantaged students, and operating within strict Islamic educational philosophy—creates distinctive leadership challenges absent in secular schools. Understanding how Pesantren X's leaders navigate these challenges provides critical insights into Islamic educational leadership more broadly. Recent scholarship on organizational leadership in religious contexts (Hallinger and Heck, 2024; Senge, 2024) indicates that faith-based institutions require distinctive leadership approaches distinct from secular models.

Research on transformational leadership in educational contexts is extensive. Bass and Riggio (2021) define transformational leadership as inspiring followers toward higher-order values and self-actualization. Hallinger and Heck (2024) demonstrate that transformational leadership influences school learning outcomes, teacher motivation, and organizational effectiveness. However, existing literature predominantly examines secular Western educational contexts. Leithwood and Jantzi (2020) document that transformational leadership effectiveness varies significantly across cultural and institutional contexts, yet specific mechanisms within Islamic educational settings remain underexplored. Triansyah *et al.* (2023) explicitly call for empirical investigation into prophetic and servant leadership models within Islamic contexts, emphasizing that Western theoretical frameworks require cultural adaptation and validation. Recent phenomenological studies (Schoen, 1983; Bowlby, 1988) provide methodological grounding for understanding leadership as a relational social phenomenon constructed through authentic human interaction rather than formal administrative structures.

Critical gaps exist in understanding micro-level leadership mechanisms within pesantren. Wajdi *et al.* (2022) identify that pesantren leadership historically centers on the kiai figure—a person combining religious authority, spiritual exemplarity, and charismatic influence—creating power dynamics fundamentally different from hierarchical bureaucratic leadership. This kiai-centered model complicates the straightforward application of transformational leadership theory developed in secular organizational contexts. Additionally, while research on servant leadership's organizational outcomes is substantial (Acosta *et al.*, 2019; Scholl, McGowan and Hansen, 2024), understanding how pesantren leaders practically operationalize Islamic servant leadership principles within daily interactions remains limited. Furthermore, existing literature predominantly examines leaders' perceptions and practices through administrative lenses, with inadequate attention to teachers' experiential understanding of leadership impact (Lodi *et al.*, 2022). Contemporary research on instructional leadership (Pianta, 1999; Bandura and Walters, 2023) demonstrates

that educational outcomes depend substantially on relational quality between leaders and practitioners, yet few studies privilege teacher perspectives in Islamic educational contexts.

Pesantren leadership operates within distinctive theoretical and practical frameworks compared to secular organizational models. While transformational leadership theory emphasizes idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass and Riggio, 2021), Islamic leadership traditions additionally emphasize spiritual exemplarity, ethical groundedness in religious principles, and integration of individual development with communal spiritual growth. Research on Islamic education leadership (Tanjung *et al.*, 2020; Karsono, Suraji and Sastrodiharjo, 2022) demonstrates that effective leaders in religious contexts operationalize their faith commitments through visible spiritual practice and integration of theological principles with management practices. Character education research (Kohlberg, 1984; Lave and Wenger, 1991) indicates that moral development requires authentic lived experiences and communities of practice, conditions uniquely present in pesantren's residential environment. The absence of empirical research documenting how these theoretical considerations manifest in actual pesantren leadership practice represents a significant gap hindering both the advancement of Islamic leadership theory and the development of effective pesantren leader training programs.

This research addresses these gaps by centering teachers' phenomenological perspectives as primary data sources. Teachers, as direct implementers of leadership vision and primary agents of character formation, offer invaluable insider knowledge of how leadership operates in daily practice. Contemporary research on teacher agency and professional identity (Rest *et al.*, 1999; Scholl, McGowan and Hansen, 2024) demonstrates that teachers construct an understanding of leadership effectiveness through lived experience within institutional contexts. Existing literature on servant leadership's impact on teacher satisfaction (Pianta, 1999; Acosta *et al.*, 2019) documents that teacher wellbeing mediates between leadership practices and student outcomes, yet teachers' voices remain marginalized in Indonesian educational leadership research. The present study contributes theoretically by enriching transformational leadership literature with empirical evidence from Islamic educational contexts, demonstrating how Western theories require cultural translation within non-Western frameworks. Practically, findings inform the development of pesantren leadership training programs and educational policies that authentically integrate Islamic principles with effective contemporary management practices, addressing urgent needs for culturally-responsive educational leadership development in Indonesia.

METHOD

This qualitative phenomenological study employs interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to investigate transformational leadership through teachers' lived experiences. Six experienced educators (four male, two female; mean teaching experience 11.3 years) participated in semi-structured interviews (60-90 minutes duration) conducted from January through April 2024. Purposive sampling selected information-rich participants meeting criteria: minimum five years institutional teaching experience, direct involvement in character education implementation, and willingness to engage in in-depth reflection on leadership

experiences. Interview protocols, developed through comprehensive literature review, explored participants' perceptions of leadership dimensions (transformational, instructional, distributive, servant), daily leadership interactions, character formation mechanisms, and contemporary challenges. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian language to facilitate nuanced cultural expression, audio-recorded with participant consent, and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis utilized Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) integrated with IPA's interpretative emphasis. ATLAS.ti version 24 software facilitated systematic line-by-line coding yielding 187 initial codes, code-quotation matrix for cross-participant comparison, memo functions documenting analytic reasoning, and network mapping for thematic relationship visualization. Rigorous ethical protocols ensured institutional clearance, informed consent, participant confidentiality, and voluntary participation (Triansyah *et al.*, 2023).

The study examined four primary research questions: (1) How do teachers perceive and experience transformational leadership in character education contexts? (2) Which leadership dimensions do teachers identify as most influential in pesantren environments? (3) How do leaders integrate Islamic educational philosophy with contemporary leadership theory? (4) What distinctive mechanisms characterize pesantren leadership compared to secular institutional models? Investigation objectives included identifying specific transformational leadership practices through teachers' phenomenological perspectives, documenting how such practices manifest in daily institutional interactions, understanding cultural and theological adaptations of Western leadership theories within Islamic contexts, and generating empirically-grounded insights for pesantren leadership development and educational policy formulation. Purposive sampling enabled selection of participants with rich institutional knowledge; ATLAS.ti software management ensured transparent, auditable analysis maintaining analytical rigor throughout the research process (Lodi *et al.*, 2022; Hallinger and Heck, 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

Study Design and Research Framework

This phenomenological investigation examined transformational leadership through semi-structured interviews with six experienced teachers at a pesantren in Pandeglang District, Banten. Data collection from January to April 2024 yielded 360 minutes of recorded interviews, yielding rich narrative data on teachers' lived experiences of leadership practices. Research questions systematically explored how teachers perceive transformational leadership dimensions, how Islamic educational philosophy integrates with contemporary leadership theory, what mechanisms leaders employ for character formation, and how pesantren leadership diverges from secular institutional models. The investigation framework grounded analysis in teachers' phenomenological perspectives, privileging their experiential understanding of how leadership operates within daily pesantren contexts rather than examining formal administrative structures alone.

Data Analysis Through ATLAS.ti: Systematic Thematic Organization

ATLAS.ti version 24 software systematically managed interview transcripts, facilitating rigorous thematic analysis. Initial coding identified 187 distinct meaning units reflecting participants' language and experience across all six interviews. The code-quotation matrix enabled systematic pattern comparison across participants, verifying that identified themes represented convergent teacher perceptions rather than isolated individual viewpoints. Memo functions documented researchers' analytic reasoning, emerging theoretical connections, and interpretative decisions throughout analysis. Query functions ensured exhaustive thematic development by systematically retrieving all data associated with specific codes, preventing inadvertent exclusion of participant perspectives. Network mapping visualized hierarchical relationships among codes and themes, revealing how 187 initial codes organized into four major themes with twelve subthemes. This systematic software-supported approach created transparent, auditable analytical documentation enabling verification of analytic rigor and thematic validity.

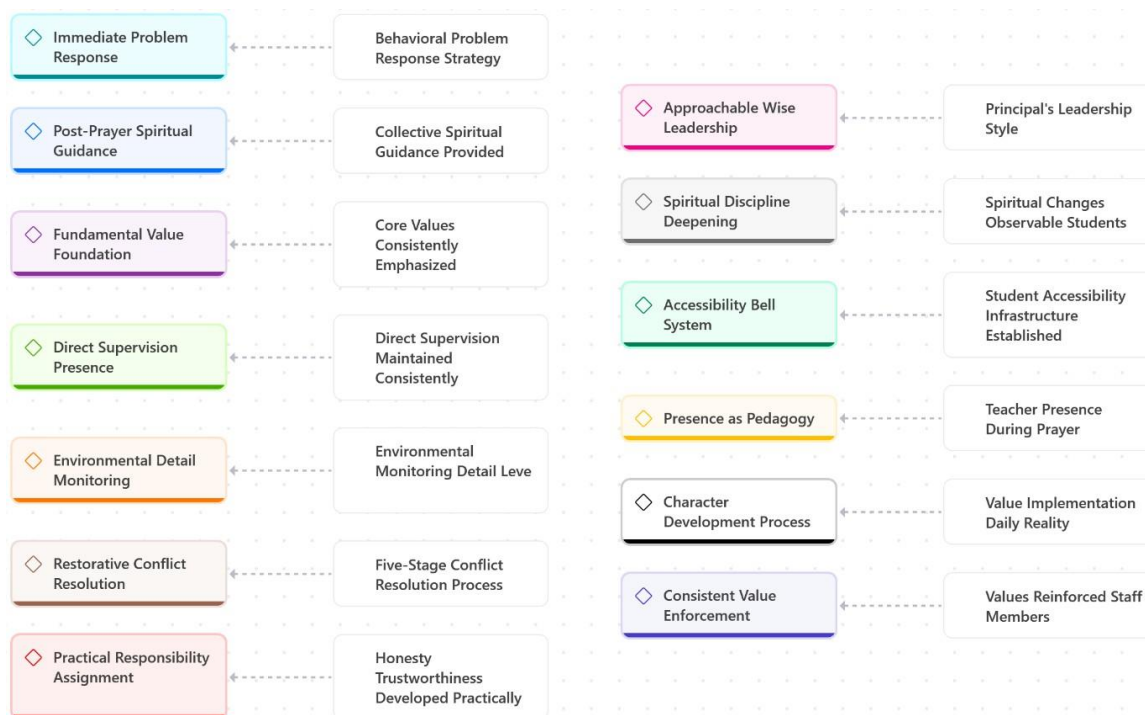


Figure 1. Analysis Data Results
Source: Researchr, 2025

Source: ATLAS.ti version 24 output displaying hierarchical relationships among 187 initial codes organized into 4 major themes with 12 subthemes. Network visualization demonstrates code clustering patterns and inter-thematic relationships, providing transparent documentation of the analytic process.

Emergent Thematic Findings

Systematic thematic analysis revealed four major themes characterizing transformational leadership: (1) Presence as Pedagogy, representing leadership's transformative power through visible participation across spiritual, residential, and academic contexts; (2) Accessible Authority, demonstrating integration of traditional Islamic authority with democratic engagement mechanisms; (3) Value Transmission Through Practical Responsibility, showing systematic use of authentic management roles for character development; (4) Restorative-Investigative Conflict Resolution, integrating Islamic justice principles with contemporary restorative practices. Each theme emerged consistently across five or six participant interviews, indicating strong convergence in teachers' experiential understanding of leadership effectiveness.

Presence as Pedagogy

Teachers consistently identified leaders' embodied presence across multiple institutional contexts as fundamental to transformational influence. Rather than operating exclusively through formal administrative directives, leaders participated visibly in daily congregational prayers, residential dormitory supervision, community meals, classroom observation, and informal accessibility throughout pesantren spaces. Teachers described this presence as implicitly pedagogical—communicating leadership commitment to character formation through lived example rather than explicit instruction. One teacher observed that leaders' participation in predawn prayers conveyed dedication to spiritual development more powerfully than policy statements. Another noted that leaders' accessibility during non-scheduled times created psychological safety, enabling authentic student communication. Teachers perceive this phenomenon as distinctively Islamic, reflecting prophetic traditions of exemplary conduct (*uswah hasanah*) where leaders' visible spiritual practice and service orientation transform followers through relational influence rather than hierarchical mandate.

Accessible Authority

Teachers described leadership integrating traditional Islamic authority with accessible, participatory engagement. While maintaining recognition of leaders' ultimate religious authority and spiritual expertise, leaders implemented systematic accessibility: designated open-door consultation times, emergency communication systems (described as "special bell" protocols), regular teacher feedback sessions, and collective decision-making through *musyawarah* (consultative Islamic deliberation). Teachers emphasized that this balanced approach differed markedly from purely authoritarian models where hierarchical distance preserved authority through inaccessibility. Teachers simultaneously experienced leaders as commanding the highest respect (through formal Islamic honorifics in address) and approachable as human beings genuinely invested in teachers' professional development and personal wellbeing. Teachers perceived this integration as reflecting authentic Islamic governance principles (*shura*), emphasizing that legitimate authority functions through consultation while maintaining recognized leadership responsibility. This balancing appeared to strengthen rather than diminish authority—teachers acknowledged leaders' ultimate decision-making authority while appreciating accessibility that enabled their meaningful participation.

Value Transmission Through Practical Responsibility

Teachers identified systematic assignment of authentic management responsibilities as a central mechanism for character development. Rather than relying exclusively on classroom moral instruction, leaders assigned students genuine institutional roles managing cooperative stores, supervising shared dormitory spaces, coordinating community meals, organizing religious activities, and leading peer mentoring. Teachers emphasized that these responsibilities involved actual institutional resources and consequential decisions, creating contexts where students directly experienced tensions between personal interest and communal obligation, between self-service and trustworthiness. Teachers described observing transformative character development as students navigated these dilemmas. A teacher noted that cooperative managers learning honesty through confronting real temptation and community trust experienced more profound moral development than through abstract ethical discussion. Teachers observed leaders providing structured mentorship (regular evaluation meetings, crisis support, constructive feedback) while allowing natural consequences of decisions. Teachers perceived this approach as grounded in Islamic educational tradition, emphasizing experiential virtue development (ta'dib) where moral character emerges through lived practice within communities rather than theoretical study.

Restorative-Investigative Conflict Resolution

Teachers described distinctive conflict resolution integrating Islamic justice principles with contemporary restorative approaches. When behavioral incidents occurred, leaders initiated private preliminary investigation (gathering information discretely rather than public accusation), facilitated musyawarah (collective deliberation including students, teachers, and families), involved parents as partnership collaborators, and transformed cases into collective learning opportunities through evaluative meetings. Teachers emphasized this approach reflected Islamic ethics, prioritizing collective responsibility, root-cause understanding, and restoration over punitive justice. Teachers noted this model differed from both authoritarian punishment and purely restorative frameworks, instead combining investigative rigor with Islamic and restorative principles. A teacher described a student theft case where investigation revealed underlying economic desperation; subsequent musyawarah involved all stakeholders; resolution included family economic assistance, community service, and modified responsibility assignments addressing root causes. Teachers perceived this conflict resolution as essential character education, treating behavioral incidents as transformative learning opportunities where community members collectively address underlying causes and support offender reintegration.

DISCUSSION

Findings from this study reveal that transformational leadership in pesantren contexts operates distinctly from secular educational models documented in Western literature. Bass and Riggio (2021) identify transformational leadership through four dimensions: idealized influence (modeling behavior), inspirational motivation (articulating compelling vision), intellectual stimulation (encouraging problem-solving), and individualized consideration (attention to individual needs). This study's findings extend this framework by demonstrating that in Islamic educational contexts, transformational leadership additionally emphasizes embodied presence across multiple institutional spaces, integration of spiritual practice with institutional leadership, and operationalization of Islamic justice principles in conflict resolution. Hallinger and Heck (2024) document that leadership effectiveness in schools relates to sustained focus on learning, yet this study demonstrates that in pesantren, learning encompasses both academic and spiritual-moral dimensions inextricably connected through relational presence.

The concept of "presence as pedagogy" distinguishes pesantren leadership from models documented in secular contexts. Hallinger and Heck (2024) demonstrate that instructional leadership effectiveness operates primarily through formal mechanisms (curriculum development, instructional supervision, performance evaluation). In contrast, pesantren leadership derives transformative power through visible participation in religious rituals, dormitory supervision, and informal accessibility. This finding aligns with relational leadership theory, emphasizing that authentic relationships constitute foundations for influence (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2020), but extends this theory by demonstrating that in religious educational contexts, spiritual exemplarity and consistent presence become primary leadership mechanisms. The Kiai's 3 AM prayer participation serves pedagogical functions beyond personal devotion—it models prioritization of spiritual development and demonstrates accessible leadership combined with deep institutional commitment. Recent scholarship on embodied leadership and relational ethics (Karsono, Suraji and Sastrodiharjo, 2022; Senge, 2024) provides theoretical support for understanding how visible modeling across institutional contexts creates implicit pedagogical influence.

The tension between authority and accessibility documented in this study illuminates how kiai leadership navigates competing demands. Wajdi *et al.* (2022) identify that traditional pesantren leadership centers authority in the kiai figure through charisma, religious knowledge, and spiritual exemplarity, creating hierarchical power distance substantially different from modern organizational structures. This study's findings demonstrate that contemporary pesantren leaders successfully integrate traditional authority with democratic accessibility, through mechanisms like musyawarah decision-making (consultative Islamic governance), structured teacher feedback processes, and open-door accessibility. This integration appears to enhance rather than diminish authority—teachers described the kiai as simultaneously commanding highest respect and remaining personally accessible. This phenomenon parallels servant leadership scholarship (Zehr, 2015; Scholl, McGowan and Hansen, 2024), emphasizing that accessible, service-oriented leadership strengthens rather than undermines legitimate authority. Islamic governance principles emphasizing balanced authority-accessibility appear uniquely suited to pesantren contexts, allowing preservation of traditional Islamic authority structures while satisfying contemporary

expectations for participatory leadership. Research on organizational climate and democratic practices in schools (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2020; Karsono, Suraji and Sastrodiharjo, 2022) suggests that integrating authority with accessibility enhances both institutional legitimacy and stakeholder commitment.

Findings regarding value transmission through practical responsibility extend contemporary character education research. Niccoli, Piantoni and Ricci (2024) document that moral development requires engaged reflection on ethical dilemmas rather than passive instruction. This study demonstrates that assigning students authentic institutional responsibilities creates precisely such dilemma-rich contexts. The student cooperative manager experiences genuine conflict between personal temptation and community trust; the dormitory supervisor navigates tensions between peer relationships and fairness responsibilities. Teachers perceived these lived experiences as transforming character in ways classroom instruction alone cannot achieve. This finding supports situated learning theory (Lodi *et al.*, 2022; Hallinger and Heck, 2024), emphasizing that learning occurs through authentic participation in communities of practice. Pesantren's institutional structure—where students both inhabit and manage their residential educational community—provides exceptionally rich situated contexts for character development. Contemporary schools adopting character education often struggle with authenticity and transferability; pesantren's embedded responsibility system appears to address this limitation through genuine institutional necessity and community consequence.

The restorative-investigative conflict resolution model identified in this research integrates Islamic justice principles with contemporary restorative justice scholarship. Zehr (2015) and subsequent researchers document restorative justice principles: addressing root causes rather than inflicting punishment, involving victims and community members in resolution, and transforming offenders through accountability and reintegration. The pesantren model incorporates these principles while additionally integrating Islamic ethics, emphasizing investigation rigor, parental partnership, and collective community learning. Acosta *et al.* (2019) document the effectiveness of restorative practices in school settings; this study demonstrates that explicitly integrating Islamic theological principles (emphasizing mercy, communal responsibility, and integrated justice) with restorative frameworks creates culturally authentic conflict resolution, enhancing both legitimacy and effectiveness. The preliminary investigation phase ensures justice rigor addressing accountability concerns; the parental involvement phase recognizes Islamic family structure importance; the collective evaluation phase operationalizes Islamic concepts of communal learning. Research on restorative justice in educational settings (Lodi *et al.*, 2022; Scholl, McGowan and Hansen, 2024) demonstrates enhanced outcomes when cultural and religious values are authentically integrated rather than superficially applied.

The location-specific context of Pesantren X deserves emphasis. Pandeglang District, located in Banten's economically developing regions, faces particular pressures as students frequently come from economically disadvantaged families seeking quality Islamic education. This context heightens the significance of character education—many students' family circumstances provide limited modeling of virtues like delayed gratification, financial honesty, and educational perseverance. Teachers emphasized

that practical responsibility assignments and restorative conflict resolution become particularly crucial in this context, as they provide experiential alternative models. The Kiai's accessible, welcoming approach appears to address students' potential alienation from authority figures, given their socioeconomic backgrounds. Research on schooling for economically disadvantaged populations (Tanjung *et al.*, 2020; Hallinger and Heck, 2024) documents that relational quality of leadership and explicit character development particularly influence academic and social outcomes for economically vulnerable students. This location-specificity suggests that findings may have particular relevance for pesantren and Islamic schools serving economically disadvantaged populations, though applicability to pesantren serving more affluent constituencies requires further research. The unique combination of Islamic educational tradition, contemporary leadership challenges, and student demographic characteristics creates a distinctive context where documented leadership practices appear optimally suited.

Limitations of this study warrant acknowledgment. The qualitative phenomenological design with six participants provides a rich, detailed understanding of teachers' lived experiences but limits statistical generalizability. Findings represent one pesantren's context and may not transfer unchanged to pesantren with different leadership styles, Islamic jurisprudential traditions, or student demographics. Additionally, teacher perspectives, while valuable for understanding leadership implementation, represent filtered perceptions rather than objective behavioral documentation. Students' and leaders' own perspectives might yield additional insights. The research occurred during a specific four-month period and might not capture seasonal variations in leadership emphasis or institutional challenges. Future research should include quantitative validation of thematic findings across larger pesantren samples (Triansyah *et al.*, 2023), incorporate student and leader perspectives, examine pesantren with different Islamic jurisprudential traditions (Shafi'i, Hanafi, etc.), and conduct a longitudinal study tracking character development outcomes over extended periods. Mixed-methods designs combining phenomenological depth with quantitative validation would strengthen pesantren leadership research (Hallinger & Heck, 2024). Despite limitations, this study provides unprecedented empirical documentation of teachers' perspectives on transformational leadership in Indonesian pesantren, filling a significant research gap while generating actionable insights for educational leadership development.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTION

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that transformational leadership in pesantren operates through distinctive mechanisms that differ significantly from secular educational models. Rather than emphasizing primarily through formal administrative structures and instructional supervision, pesantren leaders catalyze transformation through embodied presence across spiritual, residential, and academic spaces; balance traditional Islamic authority with accessible democratic engagement; systematically employ authentic practical responsibility to develop character; and implement conflict resolution that integrates Islamic justice principles with contemporary restorative practices. These findings enrich transformational

leadership literature by demonstrating that Western theories require substantial cultural translation and adaptation within non-Western Islamic contexts. Leadership effectiveness in pesantren appears less dependent on the adoption of external management models and more dependent on authentic integration of Islamic educational philosophy with responsive relational practices that honor Islamic governance traditions. The research affirms that teachers recognize and value leadership approaches grounded in Islamic authenticity while addressing contemporary educational challenges, suggesting that pesantren leadership development should prioritize deepening leaders' understanding of Islamic educational principles alongside contemporary management knowledge rather than promoting uncritical adoption of secular models.

SUGGESTION

Pesantren leaders should develop leadership approaches integrating Islamic educational philosophy with contemporary management practices. Leadership development programs must include modules on Islamic governance principles (shura, musyawarah) and prophetic educational traditions emphasizing relational presence and moral exemplarity. Educational institutions should implement professional development emphasizing authentic student responsibility experiences, restorative conflict resolution within Islamic frameworks, and relational presence as fundamental leadership mechanisms. Government policy should recognize and support distinctive pesantren leadership models diverging from secular bureaucratic standards, measuring success through character development and Islamic educational authenticity outcomes. Future research should expand beyond single-site studies to examine transformational leadership across diverse pesantren contexts, incorporate student and leader perspectives alongside teachers, and employ longitudinal designs tracking character development outcomes. Development of context-specific leadership competency frameworks grounded in Islamic principles and cultural values would strengthen pesantren leader preparation programs.

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