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The Role of Principal Leadership in Improving Educational Quality at MTs Manbatul Fikri Curugrendeng

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate and analyze the strategic leadership role of the school principal in enhancing educational quality at MTs Manbatul Fikri Curugrendeng, Subang. A qualitative approach with a phenomenological design was employed to capture the lived experiences and underlying meanings of leadership practices within a private Islamic junior high school setting. Primary data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with the principal, teachers, and administrative staff, alongside non-participant observations and comprehensive document analysis. Data were analyzed using phenomenological procedures involving epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and structural synthesis. Findings indicate that the principal's leadership plays a pivotal role in driving educational quality across four core dimensions: establishing a shared quality-oriented vision and mission, fostering continuous teacher professional development, promoting collaborative school community engagement, and optimizing resource management despite private school financial constraints. A unique phenomenological feature observed at MTs Manbatul Fikri is the integration of instructional leadership with a familial, values-driven managerial culture that significantly bolsters teacher collective efficacy and institutional trust. This study underscores the critical need for context-sensitive leadership capacity building to sustain educational reform in rural and private madrasah environments.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis secara mendalam peran kepemimpinan strategis dan manajerial kepala sekolah dalam meningkatkan kualitas pendidikan di MTs Manbatul Fikri Curugrendeng, Subang. Pendekatan penelitian yang digunakan adalah kualitatif dengan desain fenomenologis, guna menggali esensi pengalaman serta makna dari tindakan kepemimpinan dalam realitas objektif madrasah swasta. Data primer diperoleh melalui wawancara mendalam yang terstruktur dengan kepala sekolah, guru, serta staf administrasi, dipadukan dengan observasi partisipatif dan studi dokumentasi. Analisis data kualitatif dilakukan melalui teknik analisis fenomenologis yang mencakup tahapan epoche, reduksi fenomenologis, variasi imajinatif, serta sintesis makna estructural. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan kepala sekolah memegang peranan krusial dan transformatif melalui empat pilar utama, yaitu pembentukan visi-misi madrasah berorientasi mutu, pelaksanaan program pengembangan profesionalisme guru yang berbasis kolaboratif, penguatan budaya sekolah serta disiplin, dan efisiensi manajemen sumber daya di tengah keterbatasan finansial lembaga swasta. Keunikan fenomena di MTs Manbatul Fikri terletak pada penerapan model kepemimpinan instruksional berbasis kekeluargaan dan pendekatan partisipatif yang mampu meningkatkan motivasi serta efikasi diri tenaga pendidik secara berkelanjutan. Penelitian ini memberikan implikasi teoritis dan praktis bagi pemangku kebijakan pendidikan Islam dalam memformulasi strategi penjaminan mutu madrasah di tingkat daerah.

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INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental realm as well as a conscious and planned effort in shaping high-quality, competitive, character-driven, and beneficial human resources for societal, national, and state life. The learning process taking place within formal educational institutions serves as the primary medium to transform the full potential of students, enabling them to become individuals of faith, piety, knowledge, and morality, while possessing adequate skills to respond to the dynamic challenges of time (Fajar et al., 2024; Saleha et al., 2024). Juridically and constitutionally, the quality assurance and citizens' rights to education are strictly regulated under Article 31 of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, which mandates that every citizen is entitled to a proper education. This constitutional provision is operationally reinforced by Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, particularly Article 32, which emphasizes the importance of effective governance and educational quality assurance in a systematic, planned, and sustainable manner as the primary benchmark to fulfill students' rights and stakeholders' expectations.

Although the normative framework and quality assurance regulations have been comprehensively formulated, the qualitative reality of educational implementation in Indonesia continues to face various complex and multidimensional problems. Referring to the perspectives of Fajri as cited by Hidayah, educational quality issues can be categorized into two main dimensions: macro and micro. Macro issues pertain to infrastructure disparities, budget allocation, and the effectiveness of national policies, whereas micro problems stem from the internal dynamics of the school system itself, such as curriculum adjustments, teacher qualifications and professionalism, and the managerial leadership effectiveness of school principals (Rohmah, 2021; Winarsih & Purnomo, 2023).

The urgency and magnitude of the challenges in improving educational quality in Indonesia are empirically confirmed through the portrait of academic achievement at the international level. Based on the survey results released by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2018 regarding the reading, mathematics, and science competencies of secondary students, Indonesia ranked in a deeply concerning position, placing 74th out of 79 participating countries. This achievement places Indonesia in the lowest six quadrants globally. This condition illustrates a wide gap between the vast quantity of human resources available and the quality of learning output generated by educational units (Choirunisa & Saidah, 2024).

The low quality of national education directly impacts the operational structure at the primary and secondary education levels, including Islamic faith-based educational institutions such as *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* (MTs). At this operational level, educational quality and effectiveness are heavily determined by how the management system and principal leadership style are implemented (Dariyanto et al., 2020; Nursaid, 2020). Principal leadership stands as a key determinant factor that distinguishes dynamically developing schools from those experiencing quality stagnation (Musrifah & Shah, 2024; Wahib, 2024). As a central figure, the madrasah principal does not merely perform administrative routines; rather, they hold transformational and instructional leadership roles, acting as a planner, actuator, motivator, innovator, and field supervisor to ensure all school components move synergistically toward achieving shared goals (Devi & Subiyantoro, 2021; Oktafia et al., 2021; Zamawi et al., 2023). Effective and competent leadership has been proven to enhance work motivation, teacher self-efficacy, and a conducive organizational climate to achieve optimal learning quality (Ahyani et al., 2024; I. Fauzi et al., 2024; Muhyidin, 2024).

The dynamics and challenges of educational leadership are increasingly complex in private Islamic educational institutions such as MTs Manbatul Fikri, located in Kampung Curugrendeng, Curugrendeng Village, Jalancagak District, Subang Regency. Madrasah institutions possess unique characteristics as they carry not only a secular academic mission but also a moral responsibility to foster students' moral character, values of faith, and Islamic character building (Fauziah et al., 2025; Sofiana et al., 2025; Yusuf et al., 2024). On the other hand, as a private educational institution in a district-level region, MTs

Manbatul Fikri is frequently confronted with classic constraints typical of private madrasahs in general, such as limited financial support, inadequate learning infrastructure, and fluctuations in teacher discipline and professionalism. Prior to intensive managerial restructuring, regional madrasahs were often faced with challenges regarding the limited variety of instructional methods used by teachers and sub-optimal community engagement in supporting school quality programs.

The phenomenon occurring at MTs Manbatul Fikri Curugrendeng becomes highly compelling for scientific examination because, amidst these various limitations, the madrasah has managed to achieve and maintain a "B" Accreditation status from the National Accreditation Board for Schools/Madrasahs (BAN-S/M). Success in maintaining operational continuity and improving educational quality at this madrasah is undoubtedly inseparable from the leadership strategies and styles implemented by the principal (Djoyo et al., 2024; Sugiri & Ma'shum, 2022; Triono et al., 2023). The school principal is required to optimize five core competency standards personality, managerial, entrepreneurial, supervisory, and social competencies to motivate the entire teaching faculty and administrative staff to perform at their highest capacity (Apriana et al., 2022; Hidayat & Kaniati, 2024; Santi et al., 2024; Warisno & Hidayah, 2022; Zaini et al., 2023).

Based on this conceptual background and these empirical challenges, this study focuses on analyzing in-depth and holistically the role of principal leadership in improving educational quality at MTs Manbatul Fikri Curugrendeng. The study aims to phenomenologically explore how the madrasah principal formulates a quality-oriented vision and mission, fosters teacher professional development, promotes a collaborative work climate with stakeholders, and efficiently utilizes madrasah resources amidst facility constraints (Hanifah et al., 2025; Mahmud & Malik, 2024; Zaini & Syafaruddin, 2020). Through this exposition, the study results are expected to offer theoretical contributions to the advancement of Islamic educational management literature, as well as practical recommendations for strengthening private madrasah leadership in Indonesia.

METHOD

This study was designed using a qualitative approach with a phenomenological research design to examine in-depth the role of principal leadership in enhancing educational quality at MTs Manbatul Fikri Curugrendeng, Subang (Ismaya et al., 2023; Lazufa et al., 2022; Wibowo & Wakhudin, 2021). The selection of this qualitative-phenomenological approach is based on the rationale that leadership dynamics, teaching staff perceptions, and educational quality assurance efforts constitute complex, contextual, and subjectively meaningful social realities (Lim, 2024; Mendoza et al., 2024). Through the phenomenological paradigm, researchers can uncover and understand the essence of lived experiences of the principal, teachers, and administrative personnel as they interact, respond to institutional constraints, and implement various quality strategic programs within a naturalistic setting (Dangal & Joshi, 2020; Saeed & Idrees, 2024).

The field research was conducted integratively at MTs Manbatul Fikri, located in Kampung Curugrendeng, Curugrendeng Village, Jalancagak District, Subang Regency, West Java Province. Field data collection activities were carried out intensively over a two-week period, from March 4, 2024, to March 13, 2024. The selection of this timeframe was adjusted to the madrasah's academic calendar to ensure that observations regarding managerial leadership processes, classroom teaching and learning activities, and coordination dynamics among madrasah members could be fully captured without disrupting operational stability.

The determination of research subjects was conducted using a purposive sampling technique, wherein participants were deliberately selected based on criteria of direct involvement in managerial decision-making, curriculum planning, and classroom instruction (Méndez et al., 2024). The main subject serving as the key informant was the Principal of MTs Manbatul Fikri Curugrendeng. To obtain a rich and balanced perspective while avoiding single-leadership bias, the research informants also included four subject teachers

representing both senior and junior teacher groups, one administrative staff member, and representatives from the Madrasah Committee board.

Primary and secondary data collection procedures were executed through the integration of three comprehensive qualitative techniques: in-depth interviews, passive participant observation, and documentation studies. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face with all informants using an interview guide focused on four key leadership aspects: vision and mission formulation, teacher professional development, establishing a collaborative climate, and resource management (*The Role of Principal in Improvement of School Performance: A Qualitative Study in Community School of Nepal*, 2021). To ensure qualitative data validity and prevent fact sublimation, all interview sessions were recorded using a digital audio recorder, subsequently transcribed verbatim, and supported by fieldnotes.

The second technique was non-participant observation, wherein researchers directly observed the principal's leadership patterns, teacher attendance, student discipline during routine activities such as morning religious habits (*pembiasaan keagamaan pagi*), and daily communication interactions in the teacher lounge and the principal's office. Meanwhile, the third technique, documentation study, was employed to gather secondary data supporting field findings, including the Madrasah Work Plan (*Rencana Kerja Madrasah* / RKM), the Madrasah Operational Curriculum (*Kurikulum Operasional Madrasah* / KOM) documents, academic supervision instruments, teacher attendance recaps, and BAN-S/M accreditation certificates.

The qualitative data analysis process adopted Moustakas' modified phenomenological analysis framework, moving systematically through four levels of interpretive cycles (Galinha-De-Sá & Velez, 2022; Leigh-Osroosh, 2021). The initial stage began with *epoche* (bracketing), in which researchers set aside personal biases, initial theoretical assumptions, and subjective values to view the phenomenon of madrasah leadership clearly (Zahavi, 2019). The second stage was phenomenological reduction, which involved identifying units of meaning (*horizonalization*) from interview transcripts and observation notes relevant to the research questions, and subsequently grouping these key statements into essential thematic clusters.

The third stage was imaginative variation, in which researchers examined the thematic findings from various contextual perspectives to describe how the leadership phenomenon was experienced and practiced by the principal within a private madrasah environment. The final stage concluded with a synthesis of structural meanings, integrating textual and structural descriptions to formulate the single essence or core nature of the principal's leadership role in driving educational quality improvement at MTs Manbatul Fikri.

Data trustworthiness and credibility were guaranteed through the rigorous application of four qualitative standards (Adler, 2022; Ahmed, 2024; Amin et al., 2020; Kakar et al., 2023). Credibility was achieved through technique triangulation (verifying consistency among interview data, field observations, and written documents) and source triangulation (cross-checking the principal's statements with teachers and the school committee) (Morgan, 2024). Member checking was also conducted by presenting draft transcript summaries back to the informants to ensure information accuracy. Transferability was fulfilled through the provision of a thick description regarding the sociological and geographical background of MTs Manbatul Fikri in Jalancagak, Subang. Dependability was maintained by conducting an audit trail of the entire research cycle and records alongside research advisors, whereas confirmability was ensured through objective conclusion-drawing strictly grounded in factual field data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

MTs Manbatul Fikri is an Islamic faith-based formal junior high school educational unit located in Kampung Curugrendeng, Curugrendeng Village, Jalancagak District, Subang Regency, West Java Province. Operating under the auspices of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, this educational institution is officially accredited with a "B" rating from the

National Accreditation Board for Schools/Madrasahs (BAN-S/M). The primary vision upheld by MTs Manbatul Fikri is *"The Realization of Togetherness in Producing Graduates Who Are Knowledgeable, Faithful, Pious, and Possess Islamic Behavior."* This strategic vision is realized through an Operational Mission encompassing: fostering close cooperation among teachers, parents, the community, and the government; instilling moral character, courtesy, and independence; and creating role models in Islamic behavior throughout the school environment (Fauziah et al., 2025; Sofiana et al., 2025; Yusuf et al., 2024).

Based on documentation studies and field observations, the institutional profile and operational quality indicators of MTs Manbatul Fikri Curugrendeng are summarized in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Institutional Profile and Quality Indicators of MTs Manbatul Fikri Curugrendeng

Quality Indicator	Description and Empirical Condition
Accreditation Status	Accredited "B" (Very Good) by BAN-S/M
Primary Vision	Togetherness in producing students who are knowledgeable, faithful, pious, and exhibit Islamic behavior
Mission Focus	Synergy among madrasah members and the community, moral character building, and independence
Teacher Profile	14 Teachers (80% hold a Bachelor's degree in Education / S1)
Learning Facilities	Classrooms, Principal/Teacher Office, Library, Multipurpose Field
Flagship Programs	Routine Congregational *Dhuha* Prayer, *Tahfidz Al-Qur'an* (Quran Memorization), and Clinical Supervision

Data collection through in-depth interviews with the Principal of MTs Manbatul Fikri indicates that educational quality improvement begins with establishing a shared perception and commitment regarding quality standards in a private madrasah (Saleha et al., 2024). The principal emphasized that quality is not merely measured by physical attributes, but rather by student character formation and a strong religious climate. In the interview transcript, the Madrasah Principal stated:

"In this private madrasah, our primary key is maintaining shared commitment. We realize our facilities are limited; however, by unifying our vision among teachers, parents, and the committee, we can build a disciplined and religious learning environment. Every teacher must serve as a pillar of exemplary leadership for the students." (Interview, March 6, 2024).

Participatory observation data demonstrate concrete implementation of the principal's leadership style within discipline and school culture building. The principal consistently arrives at the madrasah before learning hours commence, greets students at the front gate, and leads the daily morning congregational *Dhuha* prayer and collective supplication. This practice of leading by example has gradually transformed the discipline of both teaching and non-teaching staff. Attendance recaps reveal that teacher attendance reached 94% during the running semester.

Data regarding the empirical findings on the active role of the Principal of MTs Manbatul Fikri Curugrendeng in leading educational quality improvement are categorized into four managerial instrument domains. The data reduction results from interviews and observations are summarized in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Matrix of Empirical Findings on the Leadership Role of the Principal of MTs Manbatul Fikri

Role Dimension	Findings from Interviews and Field Observations
1. Vision & Mission Formulation	Participatory vision-mission formulation; periodic socialization at faculty meetings; integration of Islamic values into quality targets.
2. Teacher Professional Development	Delegating teachers to KKM/MGMP workshops; implementing clinical academic supervision; establishing internal discussion forums.
3. Climate & Collaboration	Active involvement of the Madrasah Committee and Community Leaders; transparent communication; family-like (*kekeluargaan*) working climate.
4. Resource Management	Efficient allocation of School Operational Assistance (BOS) and Foundation funds; self-managed maintenance of work facilities.

Field findings regarding teacher professional development indicate that the Principal of MTs Manbatul Fikri emphasizes a coaching-oriented supervisory approach (Alanoğlu, 2021; Santi et al., 2024). Based on interviews with subject teachers, the principal conducts classroom supervision not to fault-find, but rather to provide corrective feedback for instructional method improvements (Elfira et al., 2024; Pomentel, 2024). Academic supervision activities are carried out regularly twice per semester, with the outcomes followed up by encouraging teacher participation in Subject Teacher Consultation forums (*Musyawarah Guru Mata Pelajaran* / MGMP) at the Subang Regency level (Karakose et al., 2024; Li & Liu, 2020; Liu et al., 2022).

In the resource management dimension, interviews with administrative staff confirm that despite operating on limited financial allocations, the principal successfully implements transparent budget prioritization (Chua & Niňal, 2024; Yizengaw & Agegnehu, 2021). Budgetary priority is directed toward the provision of basic instructional media, procurement of student textbooks, and maintaining classroom cleanliness and comfort. Furthermore, collaboration with foundation management and local community leaders is optimized to support the funding of religious extracurricular activities (Badollahi et al., 2024; Deekhuntod & Wannakum, 2024).

Educational quality enhancement within a school unit does not occur spontaneously; rather, it is the product of a systematic and directed series of managerial leadership processes. Research findings at MTs Manbatul Fikri Curugrendeng confirm that the principal's role as a prime mover and organizational locomotive is highly dominant in determining the institution's quality trajectory. As underscored in studies by Ali (2022) as well as Hasanah & Sururi, (2021), a leader's ability to stimulate, direct, and motivate teachers and administrative staff serves as fundamental social capital for achieving school effectiveness. In this context, the madrasah principal has successfully integrated personality, managerial, supervisory, and social competencies proportionally in accordance with national education standards.

The success of the Principal of MTs Manbatul Fikri in constructing a strong vision and mission provides a crucial initial foundation. The madrasah's vision, emphasizing "togetherness" and "Islamic behavior," functions as a guiding directional factor for the entire academic community. This aligns with the perspectives of Berkovich & Hassan, (2023) as well as (Heenan et al., 2024), who assert that leadership capable of driving quality transformation is leadership that positions itself philosophically and takes accountability for the organization's developmental direction. In the context of private madrasahs, establishing a participatory vision is empirically proven to foster a sense of belonging among

teachers and the surrounding community, ensuring that facility limitations are no longer perceived as a primary obstacle to achieving effective instruction.

Regarding the aspect of teacher professional development, empirical findings at MTs Manbatul Fikri demonstrate clear relevance to instructional leadership theory. The principal actively encourages teacher participation in training programs and MGMP forums, while continuously conducting academic supervision. These actions support research by Elfira et al., (2024) as well as Simarmata et al., (2024), which underscores that principal leadership focusing on instructional supervision and coaching positively impacts teacher performance, teaching motivation, and classroom self-efficacy. When educators experience professional support and friendly guidance from their principal, their commitment to designing innovative and student-centered learning scenarios increases significantly.

One of the phenomenological findings enriching this discussion is the ability of the Principal of MTs Manbatul Fikri to promote a family-like (*kekeluargaan*) collaborative climate. Within a private madrasah environment located in a sub-district/rural area such as Curugrendeng, Jalancagak, a rigid bureaucratic leadership style is often less effective. Conversely, a humanistic and transformational participative leadership approach, as examined (Damons & Wood, 2020; Heikonen & Ahtiainen, 2024; Traver-Martí et al., 2021; Ziduli & Buka, 2023), effectively bridges communication among the madrasah, parents, and community leaders. This synergistic collaboration creates a conducive educational ecosystem where the community actively shares responsibility for maintaining quality and supporting the madrasah's religious programs.

In terms of resource management, the efficiency and careful governance demonstrated by the Principal of MTs Manbatul Fikri offer a highly strategic perspective on the practical implementation of School-Based Management (SBM) principles amidst the financial constraints of private institutions. The principal successfully formulates and allocates limited operational funds based on prioritized core needs, directly optimizing classroom learning and fulfilling essential student facilities. This managerial practice empirically confirms arguments (Badollahi et al., 2024; Chua & Niňal, 2024; Deekhuntod & Wannakum, 2024), who emphasize that a principal's managerial competence is measured not merely by the volume of funds managed, but by their ability to creatively, accountably, and transparently consolidate infrastructure and financing to ensure sustainable, high-quality educational operations.

To sharpen the synthesis of findings regarding the causal relationship between transformational leadership strategies and their real impact on educational quality improvement at MTs Manbatul Fikri Curugrendeng, the overall field findings have been systematically mapped. This comparative approach aligns leadership indicators with the quality outcomes achieved by the madrasah. The comprehensive framework mapping leadership dynamics, teacher responses, and quality assurance outcomes is presented in Table 3:

Table 3. Analytical Matrix of Leadership Strategies and Educational Quality Improvement Impacts

Strategic Dimension	Principal's Managerial Actions	Implications for Educational Quality	Theoretical & Empirical Confirmation
Vision & Mission Reinforcement	Establishing religious values and togetherness as shared quality orientations.	Increased commitment of madrasah members and enhanced public trust.	(Daniel et al., 2024; M. Fauzi et al., 2024; Mustajab et al., 2023)
Coaching Supervision	Conducting periodic, coaching-based academic supervision.	Diversified instructional methods and	(Imamah & Churrahman, 2022; Nawas, 2023; Rawati

Strategic Dimension	Principal's Managerial Actions	Implications for Educational Quality	Theoretical & Empirical Confirmation
		improved teaching performance.	et al., 2022; Winarti, 2024)
Collaborative Approach	Building close partnerships with the Madrasah Committee and Community Leaders.	Creation of a safe, supportive, and conducive school climate.	(Bradshaw et al., 2021; Mayger & Provinzano, 2020; Sanchez et al., 2020; Ziduli & Buka, 2023)
Resource Optimization	Priority-based budgeting and transparent fund allocation.	Adequate availability of essential learning facilities.	(Baidowi et al., 2024; Kryshchenko, 2023; Sripeni et al., 2024; Utami & Utami, 2024)

Overall, this discussion underscores that the leadership role of the principal at MTs Manbatul Fikri Curugrendeng acts as a primary catalyst in transforming institutional limitations into quality improvement opportunities. A leadership model integrating visionary clarity, professional coaching, humanistic collaboration, and managerial accountability proves highly effective in sustainably boosting educational quality standards in private madrasahs.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the qualitative phenomenological analysis regarding the role of principal leadership in enhancing educational quality at MTs Manbatul Fikri Curugrendeng, Subang, it can be concluded that principal leadership plays a highly significant and transformative role through four strategic instruments. First, the principal has successfully formulated and transformed a strong vision and mission rooted in the principles of togetherness and Islamic values, serving as both a moral compass and operational direction for all madrasah members. Second, the principal consistently fosters teacher professional development by conducting continuous, coaching-based academic supervision and facilitating teacher participation in MGMP training forums. Third, the principal effectively builds a harmonious collaborative climate grounded in a family-like (*kekeluargaan*) approach among the madrasah administration, teaching faculty, parents, and the school committee. Fourth, the principal demonstrates accountable managerial capabilities in governing limited resources and budgets by setting strict priority scales focused on essential learning needs. Collectively, these four pillars demonstrate that financial constraints in private institutions can be offset by adaptive, humanistic, and quality-oriented managerial leadership.

As practical and academic implications of these research findings, several structured recommendations are proposed. Practical recommendations are directed toward the Principal and the Foundation Management of MTs Manbatul Fikri to continuously nurture and enhance the established participatory leadership culture, while beginning to integrate Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into the learning management system and academic supervision to address digital era challenges. For the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Subang Regency, it is recommended to provide targeted support in the form of periodic managerial training programs and adequate infrastructure assistance for rural private madrasahs to accelerate the equalization of Islamic educational quality.

Meanwhile, academic recommendations are suggested for future researchers to expand the scope of investigation by utilizing mixed-methods or explanatory quantitative approaches to empirically measure the effect size of principal leadership on teacher instructional performance and student learning outcomes across a broader madrasah population. Furthermore, comparative studies examining madrasah leadership models

between public and private institutions at the regional level are highly encouraged to enrich the comprehensive literature on Islamic educational management.

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