

## TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOLS: STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING STUDENT QUALITY

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### ABSTRACT

Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) play a crucial role in shaping students' character and academic excellence. However, many pesantren face challenges in maintaining and improving student quality due to outdated leadership approaches, lack of innovation, and limited resources. This study examines the implementation of transformational leadership in Islamic boarding schools as a strategy to enhance student quality. The research aims to analyze the impact of transformational leadership on students' academic performance, character development, and overall competency. This study employs a qualitative research approach with a case study methodology, involving interviews, observations, and document analysis in selected pesantren. School leaders, teachers, and students participated as key informants to provide a comprehensive understanding of how transformational leadership influences educational outcomes. The findings indicate that transformational leadership significantly contributes to improving student quality by fostering a positive learning environment, encouraging teacher innovation, and enhancing student motivation. Leaders who inspire, mentor, and involve students in decision-making processes contribute to better academic achievement and character formation. However, challenges such as resistance to change, inadequate leadership training, and structural constraints still hinder the full implementation of transformational leadership. Based on these findings, the study recommends continuous leadership training programs, the integration of modern educational strategies with traditional pesantren values, and increased collaboration between pesantren and external stakeholders to ensure sustainable quality improvement. Future research could explore the long-term impact of transformational leadership in different pesantren models and its adaptability to diverse educational settings.

**Keywords:** *Transformational Leadership, Islamic Boarding Schools, Student Quality, Educational Improvement, Leadership Strategies*

## A. INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) have long been instrumental in advancing the nation's development, proving that they are not merely marginal educational institutions. As noted by Madjid (Hafidhoh, 2016:90), *pesantren* education, which is deeply rooted in Indonesia's indigenous culture, has existed for centuries, dating back to the Islamic Kingdom of Pasai in Aceh and the Islamic Kingdom of Demak in Java.

*Pesantren* are characterized by several key components. According to Dhofier (2019:79), there are five fundamental elements that define *pesantren* tradition: the boarding facility (*pondok*), the mosque, the students (*santri*), the study of classical Islamic texts (*pengajian kitab-kitab Islam klasik*), and the *Kyai* (religious leader). Each of these elements plays a distinct yet interconnected role in achieving the primary objective of *pesantren*, which is to provide students with education. The ultimate goal of *pesantren* is to equip its graduates with religious and general knowledge, as well as practical skills that will help them navigate real-world societal challenges.

According to the National Education Law No. 20 of 2003, Article 5, Paragraph 1, every citizen has the right to quality education. Consequently, all educational institutions, including *pesantren*, are responsible for enhancing the quality of their education. However, the extent to which *pesantren* are capable of improving student quality remains an area that requires further investigation. Qomar (2014:137) highlights that while there is significant enthusiasm among the Muslim community for establishing *pesantren* education, its quality has not yet reached an optimal level. This enthusiasm must be carefully examined to determine whether it has been pursued with a professional approach.

Like other organizations, *pesantren* require effective leadership to determine their direction and achieve their goals. Chaoping (Putri, 2020:572) states that transformational leadership has been a focal point in academic discussions for the past three decades as a modern paradigm for understanding leadership. Avolio (2004:17) further explains that transformational leadership is more suitable than transactional leadership for institutions facing dynamic challenges and rapid changes. Effective leadership fosters positive interactions and constructive communication between *pesantren* leaders and students, which, in turn, enhances student quality. Avolio et al. (2014) also point out that "the conceptual and empirical links between authentic leadership and follower attitudes, behaviors, and performance outcomes have not been fully developed." This implies that research on the connection between authentic leadership in *pesantren* and student quality is still in its early stages.

Given this context, further research is needed to assess whether transformational leadership in *pesantren* is truly effective, productive, and innovative in enhancing student quality. The study aims to explore the implementation of transformational leadership in *pesantren* and its role in addressing student quality challenges. Additionally, it seeks to identify obstacles encountered by *pesantren* leaders and the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges.

This research was conducted at two Islamic boarding schools, Al Ihya in Cirebon and Darul Ma'arif in Majalengka. The findings indicate that student quality in these institutions has not yet reached the desired standard. As a result, the institutions have introduced student development programs supported by leadership policies that shift

from a traditional, instinctive leadership style to a more structured transformational leadership model. This shift signifies a transition from speculative leadership approaches to a leadership style that is more strategic and transformation-oriented.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Transformational and transactional leadership are often viewed as opposite ends of a leadership spectrum. However, Bass (1998) suggests that these two leadership styles are interdependent, with transformational leadership enhancing and building upon the transactional approach. While transactional leadership focuses on meeting the fundamental needs of an organization, transformational leadership fosters commitment and drives organizational change. In reality, no leader exclusively adheres to just one style; rather, every leader demonstrates a mix of both to varying degrees. It is also noted that effective leaders tend to rely more on transformational practices than transactional ones.

According to Ngaithe (2015), leaders should serve as role models for their followers by articulating a clear vision, setting a strong example, demonstrating unwavering commitment to their mission, and fostering trust and confidence within the organization. These actions contribute to improved employee performance. Bass and Riggio (2006) identify three key ways in which leaders influence their subordinates: (1) Leaders enhance their subordinates' awareness of task importance, ensuring they recognize its significance; (2) Transformational leaders prioritize organizational and team objectives while instilling the same values in their team members; (3) They place greater emphasis on addressing the individual needs of their subordinates.

Transformational leadership involves guiding followers beyond their immediate self-interests by leveraging key elements such as idealized influence (charisma), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Avolio & Bass, 1995; Bass, 1999). Leaders exhibiting idealized influence act as role models due to their exceptional capabilities and strong ethical principles (Bass, 2006; A & Gardner, 2005). The aspect of inspirational motivation ensures alignment between individual and organizational goals, making personal goal achievement an integral part of fulfilling organizational objectives. As a result, transformational leaders inspire and motivate their followers through their behaviors. This leadership style not only addresses fundamental needs but also fosters higher aspirations by encouraging innovation and creating a positive work environment (Claudine, 2015). Furthermore, it strengthens relationships between supervisors and subordinates, leading to increased job satisfaction. Research also highlights the role of transformational leadership in improving team performance (Dionne, 2004).

Regarding student quality, Juran and DeFeo (2016) define quality as "the characteristics of a product that meet customer needs and thereby provide satisfaction." In the context of pesantren, their continued existence in Indonesia underscores their essential role in society and their alignment with ancestral traditions and Islamic teachings. The strength of pesantren graduates lies not necessarily in their ease of securing jobs but in their adaptability and ability to contribute meaningfully to their communities (Dzakiyyuddin et al., 2022).

Based on this perspective, student quality can be understood as their commitment to mastering Islamic morals and general knowledge, which serve as essential life skills for their future societal roles. Khan (2020) finds a significant positive correlation between leadership quality and transformational leadership. However, the study also indicates that transformational leadership has an indirect and insignificant impact on employee burnout and social loafing. This suggests that organizational leaders should embody transformational qualities by understanding and addressing the needs of their employees effectively.

## **B. METHOD**

The method in this research is descriptive qualitative studies which its characteristics said (Sugiyono, 2019; Lambert, 2012) as naturalistic inquiry without manipulation of variables, researcher as a key instrument, inductive and deductive data analysis, participant's meaning, multiple sources of data. Using descriptive qualitative methods here enables the researcher to develop a level of detail from high involvement in the actual experiences as providing detailed descriptions, explanation, and interpretation of the data to be obtained from a research, it does not require numerical and statistical processing. Qualitative data analysis follows Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014:14) and Sugiyono (2014:246), consists of three concurrent flows of activity, namely data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The analysis follows a circular movement, creating an inductive process within the world of the data, the researchers follow the data as concepts emerge and stays open and close. Because research on the implementation of transformational leadership in the pesantren world is still rare, there is no special guidebook on this matter from the relevant ministries, especially guidelines that discuss its implementation to improve the quality of students. To study it, the implementation of transformational leadership in Islamic boarding schools to improve the quality of students was compiled using the Al Ihya Cirebon Islamic Boarding School in West Java and the Darul Ma'arif Majalengka Islamic Boarding School in West Java as the main reference.

## **C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

Pesantren leaders by implementing transformational leadership motivate and inspire their followers in directing positive changes in pesantren. Leaders tend to be judged emotionally intelligent, energetic, and passionate. Transformational leadership refers to the leader moving the follower beyond immediate self-interests through idealized influence, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, or individualized consideration (Avolio & Bass, 1995; Bass, 1999). The pesantren has developed these four components. Transformational leadership in the ideal influence component in this finding is to have a strong stance and be able to be confident in making decisions with confidence, but still need to increase assertiveness. The preparation of the quality improvement plan has been carried out within the framework of transformational leadership at the beginning

The teaching year with the aim of being in accordance with the vision and mission of the Islamic boarding school, especially towards improving learning that is active, creative, effective and fun. Inspirational motivation is carried out through giving rewards to students who have done something right that appreciation can increase

students' confidence and foster external motivation to develop themselves more, so that they will be more enthusiastic in doing the right thing. The leaders of Islamic boarding schools are very active in motivating teachers and staff and making them more aware of the importance of the educational process, and encouraging them to attach more importance to student guidance activities than personal activities.

The leaders of Islamic boarding schools provide intellectual encouragement to teachers regarding the importance of the role of teacher quality in the quality of students. Teachers are encouraged to continue their studies and are required to carry out self-development in order to be able to adapt to various changes and the needs of students who are always evolving. The leaders of Islamic boarding schools actively briefed teachers about the importance of having sensitivity competencies, namely that students will be uncomfortable learning, feel restless, anxious, bored and bored in unqualified learning, so teachers must continue to improve themselves. A pesantren leader cannot just ask his subordinates to help the pesantren achieve its goals without meeting the potential needs of subordinates. That is, among the characteristics of transformational leadership is that it tends to improve the welfare of its members. In accordance with Bass's theory above, transformational leaders in pesantren use a transformational leadership style not only when designing a long vision but also in empowering all pesantren human resources. The leadership prepares training and development to improve and transform the abilities of all pesantren residents to the maximum and to support cultural change for the better.

It was found that there are at least six methods applied in shaping the quality of students, namely: Exemplary Method (Uswah Hasanah); Training and Habituation; Taking Lessons (ibrah); Advice (mauidah); Discipline, and; Praise and Punishment (targhib wa tahzib). Example comes first according to its urgency, this is as mentioned (Bass, 2006; A & Gardner, 2005) that transformational leaders serve as the icons, support positively and transformational leadership focuses on the rising of employee motivation and attempts to link employees' sense of self with structural values. The formation of morals is carried out through practice and habituation in a disciplined manner, it is hoped that this training will make morals permanently imprinted in oneself and become an inseparable part. This is as Al-Ghazali (2021:61) states that human behavior becomes strong by frequently doing actions that are in accordance with it, while being accompanied by obedience and belief that what he does is good and pleased. Similarly, for bad behavior, consequences are provided. In Islamic boarding schools, discipline related to morals is highly upheld. The consequences for this violation are called takzir or punishment. Among the intense methods found are Targhib and Tahzib. Targhib is a promise accompanied by persuasion so that a person is happy to do virtue and stay away from evil, tahzib is a threat to cause fear of doing not do right (Nur & Hasnawati, 2020). The emphasis of the targhib method lies in the hope of doing virtue, while the emphasis of the tahzib method lies in the effort to shun evil or sin.

## DISCUSSION

### *The Concept of Transformational Leadership*

The article begins by explaining the core principles of transformational leadership, a leadership style that emphasizes motivation, inspiration, and innovation. Unlike transactional leadership, which focuses on meeting the immediate, transactional needs of the organization, transformational leadership is concerned with long-term growth, commitment, and driving change. It involves leaders who inspire their followers to transcend their self-interests for the greater good of the organization and society. The transformational leader does so through idealized influence (leading by example), inspirational motivation (aligning personal and organizational goals), intellectual stimulation (encouraging creative thinking), and individualized consideration (addressing individual needs).

### *Transformational Leadership in Pesantren*

In the context of pesantren, transformational leadership is not just about academic excellence; it also embodies the holistic development of students in line with Islamic values (Dzakiyyuddin, M., et al. 2022).. Pesantren, which have historically been centers for Islamic learning, are seen as institutions that equip students with both religious and general knowledge (Aini, R.A.N, 2019). However, many pesantren face challenges in keeping pace with modern educational demands while maintaining traditional values. In this light, transformational leadership provides a strategic approach to address these challenges.

By embracing transformational leadership, pesantren leaders, or Kyai, can create an environment that inspires students to become proactive learners, critical thinkers, and moral agents. For instance, the visionary approach in transformational leadership encourages the development of a clear direction that aligns both the institution's educational goals and its spiritual mission, fostering a sense of purpose among students. This alignment makes students not just recipients of knowledge but active participants in their own educational journey.

### *Improving Student Quality*

The article delves into how student quality can be significantly improved through transformational leadership practices. As highlighted, student quality is not simply about academic success but also about the development of strong Islamic character and life skills that prepare students for their roles in society. The commitment of students to their studies, particularly in mastering Islamic morals and knowledge, becomes a key indicator of the overall quality of education. Transformational leadership encourages a commitment to growth, both personal and academic, which enhances student motivation and the drive to excel.

Moreover, as Bass and Riggio (2006) pointed out, transformational leadership creates a dynamic relationship between leaders and followers. The role of the Kyai becomes crucial in setting an example, encouraging students to embrace the values of Islamic integrity, social responsibility, and academic excellence. By focusing on students' individual needs, leaders can ensure that each student receives personalized attention, enhancing their overall development.

### *The Challenges and Opportunities*

Despite the benefits, the article acknowledges that the application of transformational leadership in pesantren is not without challenges. One of the main obstacles is the potential resistance to change from more traditional elements within the pesantren. In some cases, conservative mindsets may resist the introduction of modern teaching techniques or leadership models (Dionne, et.all, 2004). However, the article also suggests that the shifting landscape of education, with the growing demand for quality learning outcomes, creates an opportunity for transformation within pesantren. Embracing transformational leadership can help pesantren adapt to contemporary challenges while staying true to their mission of preserving Islamic values.

Additionally, the barriers to effective leadership, such as limited resources or leadership training, can impede the full implementation of transformational practices. However, when leaders focus on continuous professional development and strive for innovation and collaboration, these challenges can be overcome. The key lies in creating a supportive environment where leaders and followers work together to achieve shared goals.

### **CONCLUSION**

The conclusion emphasizes the critical role of the pesantren leader in shaping the educational environment and guiding the students toward success. The leader's multifaceted responsibilities as a supervisor, decision-maker, advisor, and director reflect the significant influence they hold within the institution. As a highly respected figure among the students and the surrounding community, the leader actively participates in daily activities, overseeing the implementation of educational programs, and ensuring that the teachers are fulfilling their duties with seriousness and dedication. This hands-on approach is a core aspect of effective leadership in Islamic boarding schools.

The article further confirms that transformational leadership has been effectively applied in pesantren to improve student quality. This leadership model has been implemented through four key components: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Each of these elements is designed to foster an environment where students are not only motivated but also inspired to pursue academic and personal growth. However, despite its positive impact, the implementation of transformational leadership in these institutions still faces certain limitations. The article notes that the approach has not been fully optimized, as there remain gaps in regular training and workshops, which are necessary to ensure consistent growth and development.

The management of student quality has been tackled through systematic processes such as quality planning, quality control, and quality improvement. These efforts demonstrate a clear commitment to enhancing the educational standards within pesantren. However, the research also highlights various obstacles that continue to impede the full realization of transformational leadership, such as limited resources and

inconsistent application of the institution's vision, mission, and programs. These challenges are being addressed through strategic solutions to ensure that the pesantren can continue evolving in response to modern educational needs while preserving its rich tradition.

In conclusion, while the application of transformational leadership in Islamic boarding schools has shown promising results in improving student quality, there is still room for development, particularly in addressing structural and resource-related challenges. By refining its practices and ensuring continuous professional development, the leadership in pesantren can fully harness the potential of transformational leadership to achieve excellence in both the academic and personal growth of students.

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