

Visionary Leadership of Kyai in Enhancing the Quality of Islamic Education at Islamic Boarding Schools in Jambi Province, Indonesia

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Abstract: This study explores the visionary leadership strategies of Kyai in enhancing the quality of Islamic education at Pondok Pesantren Daarul Attauhid, Raudhatul Mujawwidin, and Al Jauharen in Jambi Province, Indonesia. Employing a qualitative approach with a multi-site design, the study collected data through in-depth interviews, participant observations, and document analysis. Findings reveal that visionary Kyai leadership is characterized by strong vision, educational innovation, integration of diniyah and general curricula, and collaboration with external stakeholders. Key challenges include limited human resources, insufficient infrastructure, and lack of stakeholder engagement. The study recommends leadership training, institutional capacity development, and technological integration to address these challenges and support sustainable Islamic education.

Keywords: Educational Innovation; Islamic Boarding School; Islamic Education; Kyai; Visionary Leadership

1. Introduction

Islamic boarding schools, known locally as pondok pesantren, hold a crucial place in Indonesia's education system. These institutions serve not only as centers for preserving and transmitting Islamic religious traditions but also as formative environments where generations of Muslim youth are nurtured intellectually, morally, and spiritually. In the face of increasing societal demands and the rapid acceleration of globalization, pesantren face significant pressures to adapt and modernize. This calls for a comprehensive enhancement of educational quality that aligns with both traditional values and contemporary educational standards.

At the heart of this transformation is visionary leadership. The kyai, who historically have been spiritual guides and community leaders, are now tasked with broader roles that extend beyond religious instruction. As both spiritual and administrative leaders, they must become proactive change agents who strategically guide pesantren through educational reforms and institutional development. Their ability to articulate a clear vision, foster innovation, and mobilize resources is critical to ensuring pesantren remain relevant and effective in preparing their students for the complexities of the modern world.

Despite the recognized importance of leadership in pesantren, much of the existing research tends to focus narrowly either on traditional forms of religious leadership or on general educational management practices. These studies often overlook the nuanced ways in which visionary leadership specifically influences the quality and modernization of

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Islamic education within the increasingly complex and globalized educational landscape. Furthermore, a significant portion of the literature relies on single-site case studies, which limits the ability to generalize findings across different pesantren contexts.

This creates a notable research gap concerning how visionary leadership is practically implemented and manifested across multiple pesantren, especially those that differ in their institutional visions, curriculum designs, and stakeholder engagement strategies. By conducting a comparative analysis of three distinct pesantren, this study aims to address this gap. It provides a richer, more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which visionary leadership drives educational transformation, ultimately contributing valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of leadership within the Islamic boarding school ecosystem.

This study explores the application of visionary leadership principles by Kyai in enhancing the quality of education within three pesantren located in Jambi Province. It delves into how these leaders navigate both the opportunities and challenges inherent in their roles, encompassing strategic decision-making, innovation adoption, and community engagement. By analyzing their approaches and experiences, the research aims to generate practical insights and actionable recommendations that can be utilized by other pesantren leaders throughout Indonesia. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on leadership in Islamic educational institutions, highlighting pathways for sustainable improvement and modernization.

2. Literature Review

The literature on educational leadership in Islamic boarding schools has expanded significantly, particularly concerning the role of Kyai. However, many studies focus narrowly on traditional leadership models rooted in religious authority without integrating contemporary theories of change management or innovation. Visionary leadership—while discussed broadly in general education contexts—is underexplored in Islamic education, particularly within pesantren settings.

Furthermore, much of the existing literature discusses leadership in isolated case studies, limiting our understanding of how visionary leadership manifests in diverse pesantren environments. For instance, studies by Komariah and Triatna (2016) and Kompri (2018) emphasize leadership effectiveness in educational settings but do not specifically address how Kyai translate religious and educational visions into institutional transformation across different pesantren types. Likewise, Mahmud (2016) highlights leadership in pesantren but focuses more on spiritual influence than strategic educational development.

This study seeks to bridge the theoretical and empirical gaps by grounding its framework in both Islamic educational philosophy and modern leadership paradigms. By analyzing multiple pesantren in Jambi Province, the research expands the literature with a

comparative perspective, showcasing how Kyai engage with visionary leadership principles to innovate, collaborate, and enhance educational quality in practical, context-specific ways.

2.1 Visionary Leadership

Visionary leadership refers to a leadership style centered on articulating a clear, long-term direction that aligns organizational goals with shared values and collective motivation. It encompasses not only foresight but also the capacity to mobilize people toward realizing that future through innovation, collaboration, and systemic transformation. Scholars such as Daft (2016) describe visionary leaders as those who combine a compelling vision with emotional intelligence and the ability to inspire others to act toward common goals.

In educational settings, visionary leadership emphasizes moral purpose, continuous improvement, and responsiveness to societal changes. Visionary school leaders are proactive in anticipating educational trends, integrating new technologies, and fostering inclusive environments that empower both staff and students. This leadership style contrasts with transactional or bureaucratic models that focus primarily on maintaining the status quo. According to Sergiovanni (1990), visionary leadership is most effective when it is value-driven, fostering a culture of commitment rather than compliance.

In the context of Islamic education, visionary leadership must balance the preservation of religious tradition with the pursuit of educational excellence and relevance. Kyai as visionary leaders are expected to reinterpret classical Islamic values in the face of contemporary challenges—bridging sacred knowledge (*tafaqquh fid-din*) with worldly skills necessary for modern life. This duality requires a transformative approach to leadership that includes strategic thinking, curriculum innovation, community engagement, and institutional resilience.

Thus, visionary leadership is not merely about setting ambitious goals, but about embedding those goals within a moral and educational framework that promotes holistic student development and long-term institutional sustainability.

2.2 Kyai and Their Role in Pesantren

Kyai are central figures in pesantren leadership. Traditionally regarded as the custodians of Islamic knowledge and spirituality, their authority is rooted not only in religious scholarship but also in their personal integrity, moral standing, and trust bestowed upon them by the community. Historically, the legitimacy of a Kyai was derived from their mastery of Islamic sciences (*tafaqquh fi al-din*), lineage, and often charismatic leadership style that connected deeply with both students and society at large.

However, in the context of modern pesantren, the role of Kyai has expanded significantly. They are now expected not only to safeguard religious traditions but also to lead institutional development in the face of evolving educational demands. This includes

managing curriculum reform, integrating general education with religious studies, adopting technology in teaching, ensuring quality assurance, and establishing partnerships with governmental and non-governmental organizations.

As visionary leaders, Kyai are required to articulate a forward-looking vision that aligns religious objectives with national educational standards. Their leadership is no longer limited to spiritual guidance, but extends to strategic planning, organizational management, financial oversight, and human resource development. They must develop innovative educational programs, enhance student competencies, and respond to contemporary socio-political challenges.

Moreover, Kyai play a key diplomatic role, representing their institutions in broader educational forums and inter-institutional collaborations. In some pesantren, Kyai are also instrumental in community development, acting as mediators in conflict resolution and as moral references in public life. This multidimensional leadership requires a delicate balance between preserving pesantren's unique cultural-religious identity and enabling modernization and relevance in a globalized world.

Therefore, the Kyai of today must be equipped not only with religious authority but also with the vision, adaptability, and leadership skills necessary to navigate complex educational landscapes and uplift the quality of Islamic education in pesantren.

2.3 Quality in Islamic Education

Educational quality is a multi-dimensional concept that includes curriculum relevance, teaching effectiveness, student outcomes, teacher competence, learning environment, institutional sustainability, and stakeholder satisfaction. In the context of pesantren, quality is often framed through the lens of religious mastery (*tafaqquh fid-din*), deep moral character formation, discipline, and the cultivation of a worldview rooted in Islamic values. Yet, as pesantren evolve to integrate general education and respond to national education standards, the indicators of quality have likewise become more complex.

Academic excellence in pesantren today involves both the mastery of classical Islamic texts and the capacity to engage with contemporary knowledge, including science, mathematics, technology, and language skills. Teaching effectiveness must go beyond rote learning to include active pedagogy, critical thinking, and interdisciplinary approaches. In addition, quality in Islamic education also implies institutional governance that is transparent, participatory, and focused on continuous improvement.

Student outcomes are not only evaluated through religious knowledge or memorization of Qur'an, but also through measurable competencies such as communication skills, social responsibility, problem-solving ability, and entrepreneurial mindset. Moreover, institutional quality is affected by the availability of resources—qualified teachers, adequate facilities, and the integration of technology to support both learning and administration.

Thus, quality in Islamic education, especially in the pesantren setting, must be understood as a dynamic construct that encompasses spiritual, intellectual, and practical domains. Visionary leadership becomes essential in defining and navigating this expanded understanding of quality, ensuring that pesantren graduates are both rooted in tradition and prepared to contribute meaningfully to a modern, pluralistic society.

2.4 Previous Studies

Research by Mahmud (2016), Ghofur (2021), and Kompri (2018) support the notion that visionary leadership contributes significantly to education quality in pesantren. Mahmud emphasized the influence of Kyai as moral and spiritual leaders, yet his study focused on a single pesantren and primarily examined the religious aspects of leadership. Ghofur's work highlighted the correlation between visionary school heads and student discipline, but it lacked broader institutional and managerial analysis. Kompri provided a comprehensive review of pesantren leadership structures but did not delve deeply into the mechanisms by which vision is translated into educational quality.

Moreover, most existing studies are contextually confined and utilize mono-site designs, making it difficult to draw generalized conclusions applicable to various pesantren typologies. They often neglect the interplay between visionary leadership and the dynamic elements of educational transformation such as curriculum integration, digital innovation, teacher empowerment, and institutional partnerships. Additionally, there is limited empirical evidence explaining how Kyai develop and sustain a vision amidst structural and cultural challenges.

This research addresses these gaps by conducting a comparative analysis across three pesantren in Jambi Province. It investigates how Kyai formulate and implement visionary leadership strategies that impact curriculum development, teaching methods, institutional governance, and stakeholder engagement. By doing so, the study contributes a nuanced understanding of visionary leadership in pesantren and offers a model for leadership development rooted in both Islamic and contemporary educational principles.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This qualitative study uses a multi-site case study approach. It explores three pesantren in Jambi Province selected based on diversity in size, curriculum models, and leadership styles.

3.2 Data Collection

Primary data were collected through:

- a. Interviews: Conducted with Kyai, teachers, and students
- b. Observations: Classroom activities, leadership meetings, and extracurricular events
- c. Document Analysis: Curriculum documents, school policies, and strategic plans

3.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied, using coding to identify key patterns related to visionary leadership and educational improvement.

4. Findings

4.1 Strong Vision and Institutional Goals

All three pesantren demonstrated well-articulated visions that not only shaped institutional identity but also guided strategic decision-making across academic, spiritual, and managerial domains. The Kyai in each pesantren played a central role in formulating and communicating these visions to their stakeholders. These visions served as the philosophical foundation for institutional development and were crucial in aligning daily operations with long-term goals.

- a. Daarul Attauhaid articulated a vision centered on producing competitive, ethical, and globally competent leaders. The pesantren emphasized a dual-track curriculum, integrating formal national standards with deep Islamic learning. This vision drove the development of modern classrooms, teacher training initiatives, and external collaborations with universities and government agencies.
- b. Raudhatul Mujawwidin adopted a vision that upheld Islamic values while committing to continuous quality improvement. Their institutional strategy included internal evaluation systems, benchmarking with other pesantren, and the introduction of co-curricular programs aimed at enhancing student leadership and soft skills. Their vision functioned not only as a religious compass but also as a standard for accountability.
- c. Al Jauharen emphasized a hybrid educational philosophy, combining traditional *salafiyah* instruction with modern *khalafiyah* approaches. Their vision prioritized the preservation of classical texts alongside the integration of science, technology, and vocational education. The pesantren invested in curriculum innovation and infrastructure expansion to support this dual mission.

In all three cases, the vision was not a static statement but a dynamic narrative, continuously revisited and reinforced through leadership practices, teacher involvement, and community engagement. Vision alignment was achieved through structured communication, professional development, and involvement of stakeholders in institutional planning. This strategic clarity enabled the pesantren to maintain focus despite operational challenges and allowed them to pursue educational transformation within a faith-based framework.

- a. Daarul Attauhaid: Focused on producing competitive and ethical leaders
- b. Raudhatul Mujawwidin: Emphasized Islamic values and quality assurance
- c. Al Jauharen: Integrated traditional (salafiyah) and modern (khalafiyah) education

4.2 Educational Innovation

The Kyai at the three pesantren studied introduced various new teaching methods aimed at enhancing the quality of the learning process and preparing the santri to face future challenges. One of the primary innovations was the implementation of blended learning, which combines traditional face-to-face instruction with digital technology and online resources. This approach allows students to learn more flexibly and interactively, providing access to learning materials that they can study independently according to their individual needs and abilities. Consequently, blended learning not only improves learning effectiveness but also fosters self-directed learning among the santri.

In addition, the Kyai developed entrepreneurship programs integrated into the curriculum to equip the santri with practical skills relevant to today's workforce and economy. These programs involve hands-on training such as managing small businesses, product development, marketing, and basic financial management. Santri are encouraged to actively participate in entrepreneurial projects that cultivate creativity, innovation, and a sense of responsibility. This approach not only enhances motivation to learn but also equips santri with essential life skills for economic independence and social development.

Other innovations include the adoption of more participatory and student-centered teaching methods that encourage active student involvement through group discussions, case studies, and relevant practical activities. This approach contributes to better material retention and the development of critical thinking, communication, and teamwork skills among the santri.

Overall, these innovations significantly increased student engagement and motivation, strengthening their readiness to face further educational challenges and future careers. By combining modern learning methods with practical entrepreneurship programs, the pesantren successfully produce graduates who are not only proficient in religious knowledge but also competent in navigating the complexities of contemporary social and economic life.

4.3 Curriculum Integration

A key factor in improving the quality of education in pesantren is the integration of traditional Islamic studies with formal academic subjects commonly taught in public and private schools. This integrated curriculum model successfully combines the strengths of both approaches, enabling students to gain deep religious knowledge while also acquiring relevant skills and knowledge for the modern world.

For example, Pondok Pesantren Daarul Attauhid adopts a dual curriculum that merges diniyah education with the national formal curriculum. The diniyah curriculum focuses on intensive study of the Qur'an, Hadith, jurisprudence (fiqh), ethics, and other Islamic sciences, while the formal curriculum covers general subjects such as mathematics, Indonesian language, English, science, and social studies. This approach allows students

not only to comprehensively understand Islamic values and teachings but also to meet national education competency standards.

This integrated curriculum enables pesantren graduates to smoothly continue their education to higher levels and compete effectively in the workforce. Students following the dual curriculum develop a balanced mastery of religious knowledge and formal academic skills, allowing them to adapt well to academic and professional environments outside the pesantren.

In addition to Daarul Attauhid, other pesantren such as Raudhatul Mujawwidin and Al Jauharen have developed curriculum integration models tailored to their vision and resources. Some pesantren also incorporate vocational and technological skills programs as part of the formal curriculum to further prepare students for global challenges.

The success of this curriculum integration depends heavily on the Kyai and pesantren administrators who actively innovate and develop the curriculum, provide teacher training for cross-disciplinary teaching, and collaborate with formal educational institutions and government bodies. Through these efforts, pesantren maintain Islamic scholarly traditions while providing education that is relevant and high-quality, meeting contemporary needs.

4.4 Collaborative Management

Collaborative management has become a key factor in the success of improving educational quality in pesantren. The Kyai and pesantren administrators actively establish strategic partnerships with various external stakeholders, including local governments, universities, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These collaborations not only strengthen the resources available to the pesantren but also enhance the relevance of the curriculum to real-world community needs and labor market demands.

Partnerships with local governments provide pesantren with access to funding support, teacher training programs, and improved educational facilities. Governments also assist in implementing quality improvement initiatives and education monitoring programs, which increase transparency and accountability within the pesantren.

Collaboration with universities opens opportunities for pesantren to access academic resources, professional development for teachers, and joint research programs that support curriculum development and innovative teaching methods. University students and faculty members also contribute through community service projects and mentoring programs within the pesantren.

Moreover, partnerships with NGOs often deliver entrepreneurship training, information technology workshops, as well as assistance with educational facilities and equipment. NGOs also act as facilitators in introducing new learning models and capacity-building initiatives for pesantren development.

This collaborative management approach is underpinned by effective communication, structured coordination, and shared commitment between the pesantren

and their partners. Through these collaborations, pesantren not only acquire additional resources but also receive constructive feedback and evaluations essential for continuous quality improvement.

By adopting collaborative management, pesantren can overcome internal limitations and adapt more readily to changes in educational and social environments. This readiness enables pesantren to produce graduates who are academically competent, morally grounded, and well-prepared to face contemporary challenges.

4.5 Challenges Faced

Despite significant progress, the pesantren studied face several persistent challenges that affect the overall effectiveness of educational improvement efforts.

- a. **Limited Human Resources:** One of the main challenges is the shortage of qualified teachers who are proficient in both *diniyah* (Islamic religious studies) and formal general education subjects. Many pesantren struggle to recruit and retain educators who can effectively teach across these integrated curricula. This gap limits the pesantren's ability to provide balanced and comprehensive education that meets both religious and academic standards. Additionally, the professional development opportunities for teachers remain insufficient, affecting their ability to update teaching methods and subject knowledge.
- b. **Infrastructure Constraints:** Physical infrastructure and technological facilities are often inadequate to support the modern learning environment envisioned by the pesantren. Many classrooms are overcrowded or poorly equipped, limiting effective teaching and learning activities. The lack of sufficient information technology (IT) resources such as computers, reliable internet access, and digital learning tools further hampers the implementation of blended learning and other innovative educational practices. These infrastructural limitations pose significant barriers to enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes.
- c. **Vision Misalignment:** Another challenge is the occasional misalignment or lack of clarity regarding the pesantren's institutional vision among teachers and staff. While Kyai and leadership may have a well-defined vision, its communication and internalization throughout the organization can be inconsistent. Some educators and administrative personnel may not fully understand or embrace the strategic goals, leading to fragmented efforts and reduced effectiveness in implementing educational reforms. This disconnect can weaken organizational cohesion and the shared commitment necessary to drive sustained improvement.

5. Discussion

This study confirms that visionary leadership serves as a pivotal transformative force within pesantren, driving significant improvements in educational quality and institutional development. Kyai who clearly articulate and communicate a compelling

vision, combined with a willingness to embrace innovation, create an environment conducive to enhanced learning outcomes. Their leadership fosters a culture of progress and openness to new methods that balance traditional religious education with modern academic demands.

The successful integration of religious and secular curricula is a notable achievement in this context. By combining these two domains, pesantren prepare students to excel not only in Islamic knowledge and spiritual development but also in secular education, which is essential for higher education pursuits and competitive career pathways. This dual focus enables santri to navigate the complexities of contemporary society while remaining firmly grounded in their religious identity.

However, the study also highlights several challenges that impede full realization of visionary leadership's potential. Resource limitations, including shortages of qualified educators and inadequate infrastructure, hinder the effective implementation of innovative curricula and teaching methods. Furthermore, there is a clear need for ongoing leadership training and professional development to equip Kyai and pesantren administrators with the skills necessary for strategic management, educational innovation, and institutional governance.

The role of the Kyai is evolving in response to these demands. Traditionally viewed primarily as spiritual leaders and moral guides, Kyai are increasingly expected to assume the roles of strategic managers, educational leaders, and change agents. This shift requires a significant change in mindset, moving beyond religious authority to encompass skills in organizational leadership, human resource development, financial management, and stakeholder engagement.

Supporting this evolution necessitates institutional and systemic support, including access to leadership development programs, mentoring, and networks that enable knowledge exchange and capacity building. Without such support, Kyai may struggle to meet the multifaceted demands of their expanding roles, potentially limiting the sustainability of educational reforms.

In summary, while visionary leadership has proven to be a catalyst for positive change in pesantren, its full impact depends on addressing structural challenges and fostering the professional growth of Kyai as dynamic leaders capable of navigating both religious and educational complexities.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that Kyai who demonstrate visionary leadership play a crucial role in significantly enhancing the quality of education within pesantren. Their capacity to inspire stakeholders, foster innovation, and effectively integrate traditional Islamic education with modern academic curricula is essential to addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by contemporary education demands.

Visionary Kyai serve not only as spiritual guides but also as strategic leaders who can navigate the complexities of educational transformation. Their leadership catalyzes institutional improvements that result in better learning outcomes, holistic student development, and greater institutional resilience.

To sustain and scale the positive impacts of this leadership model, it is imperative for pesantren to invest strategically in human resource development. This includes continuous professional training for Kyai, teachers, and administrative staff to equip them with up-to-date pedagogical, managerial, and technological skills.

Furthermore, strengthening technology infrastructure is vital to support innovative teaching methods such as blended learning, digital resource utilization, and effective communication within and beyond the pesantren environment.

Lastly, fostering collaborative networks with government bodies, higher education institutions, NGOs, and the wider community enhances resource mobilization, knowledge sharing, and capacity building. Such partnerships broaden the pesantren's support system, facilitating sustainable educational advancement.

In essence, visionary leadership, underpinned by investments in people, technology, and partnerships, offers a powerful pathway for pesantren to fulfill their mission of producing graduates who are academically competent, spiritually grounded, and socially responsible in an increasingly complex world.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several strategic recommendations are proposed to strengthen the role of visionary leadership in pesantren and to further enhance the quality of Islamic education:

a. Implement Leadership Training Focused on Strategic Visioning and Educational Management:

It is essential to develop comprehensive leadership training programs tailored specifically for Kyai and pesantren administrators. These programs should emphasize strategic vision development, change management, decision-making, and effective educational administration. Equipping leaders with these skills will enable them to formulate clear, forward-looking plans and to manage institutional resources efficiently.

b. Encourage Curriculum Innovation That Balances Religious and General Education:

Pesantren should continue to innovate their curricula by integrating Islamic studies with formal academic subjects, vocational skills, and life competencies. This balanced approach will prepare santri not only as knowledgeable religious individuals but also as competitive graduates ready for higher education and professional careers. Curriculum innovation must be responsive to societal needs and technological advancements.

- c. Establish External Partnerships for Technical and Financial Support: Building and nurturing partnerships with local governments, universities, NGOs, and private sector organizations can provide pesantren with additional resources, expertise, and funding opportunities. These collaborations can support teacher training, infrastructure development, curriculum enhancement, and community engagement initiatives, fostering a supportive ecosystem for pesantren growth.
- d. Digitize School Operations to Enhance Efficiency and Monitoring: Adoption of digital technologies for administrative processes, data management, student monitoring, and communication can significantly improve the efficiency and transparency of pesantren operations. Digital platforms also facilitate real-time reporting and decision-making, enabling leaders to better track educational outcomes and respond promptly to challenges.

Implementing these recommendations will strengthen the capacity of pesantren leaders and institutions, enabling them to adapt to modern educational demands while preserving their religious identity and mission.

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