



Transformational Leadership in Islamic Schools: Driving the Implementation of Child-Friendly School Initiatives

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to analyze the role of madrasah principals' leadership in implementing the Child-Friendly School Program (Madrasah Ramah Anak), while also examining its impacts, supporting factors, and challenges. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Data analysis involved data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that madrasah principals play multiple leadership roles—as educators, managers, supervisors, innovators, and leaders—in driving the implementation of child-friendly initiatives. The program is carried out systematically through daily habit-building activities, the provision of child-friendly infrastructure, and cross-sectoral collaboration. Positive impacts include increased student comfort, reduced bullying, heightened awareness of nutrition and hygiene, and the creation of a safe and inclusive school culture. Key enabling factors include regulatory support from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, active teacher participation, and partnerships with local health centers and law enforcement. However, the program faces several challenges, such as limited funding, teacher resistance to change, and difficulties in maintaining consistent implementation. These findings highlight the critical role of visionary leadership in transforming Islamic schools into safe, inclusive, and student-centered learning environments.

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INTRODUCTION

Education serves as a strategic vehicle for shaping generations endowed with strong character, noble morals, and essential life skills for the future. In the context of Islamic education, madrasahs carry the responsibility not only to transfer knowledge but also to instill humanitarian values and high moral standards (Hidayat et al, 2025). As educational paradigms evolve, there is a

growing emphasis on fulfilling children's rights, leading to the emergence of the Child-Friendly Madrasah (Madrasah Ramah Anak, MRA) concept. This initiative concretely aims to create educational environments that are safe, inclusive, participatory, and free from violence and discrimination. Such efforts are vital in broader society because schools shape children's development, wellbeing, and future social behavior (Rozi & Badriyah, 2025). By promoting child-friendly spaces, madrasahs contribute to nurturing well-rounded individuals capable of positive societal participation. Thus, studying how these programs are implemented, especially the role of leadership, is critical to ensuring their effectiveness and societal impact.

Despite the growing awareness of children's rights in education, many schools and madrasahs face challenges in fully realizing child-friendly environments. Issues such as bullying, discrimination, lack of participation opportunities for students, and unsafe physical or social conditions persist (Fawaid et al., 2024). These problems hinder children's ability to learn, develop, and thrive. Moreover, in the Islamic education context, balancing academic rigor with the promotion of humane and moral values remains complex (Riduan & Zamroni, 2024). Without effective leadership, programs designed to safeguard children's rights and promote inclusivity often fail to achieve sustainable impact (Thohir, 2024). The lack of clear policies, limited resources, and resistance to change further complicate efforts. Therefore, identifying the leadership dynamics that influence the success of Child-Friendly Madrasah programs is essential to address these systemic problems and improve educational outcomes for children in madrasahs (Alfaridli et al., 2024).

In practice, the implementation of the Child-Friendly Madrasah (MRA) program is varied and faces both achievements and obstacles. A notable example is Madrasah Tsanawiyah Negeri 3 Banyuwangi, a pioneer recognized for successfully implementing the MRA program and receiving an award for the best child-friendly madrasah in Banyuwangi in 2024. The program includes policies such as smoke-free zones, drug-free commitments, anti-violence and anti-discrimination measures, and environmental initiatives (Adiwiyata). The school also utilizes reward and penalty systems where students earn or lose points based on behavior, encouraging responsibility and positive conduct. Posters promoting child-friendly values are placed strategically throughout the campus. These practical steps reflect how leadership and community collaboration translate policies into action. However, challenges remain, including budget constraints and occasional resistance from staff, underscoring the complexity of sustainable program implementation in real-world settings.

Previous research has extensively explored the importance of leadership in educational institutions, highlighting how principals' roles impact school culture and student wellbeing. Studies have shown that effective leaders serve as visionaries, managers, and facilitators of positive change (Nor, 2024). Specifically, in the context of child-friendly schools, leadership is critical in policy development, staff motivation, and stakeholder collaboration. International literature on child-friendly schools emphasizes the need for inclusive, safe, and participatory learning environments where children's rights are respected and nurtured. However, existing studies tend to focus broadly on general school settings, with limited exploration into madrasah contexts where cultural and religious values intersect with educational leadership. This gap signals the need for research that considers the unique challenges and opportunities madrasah principals face in implementing child-friendly programs, integrating Islamic values with child rights frameworks.

Moreover, while there is recognition of the potential for madrasah leadership to influence educational quality and student wellbeing, few studies have provided empirical insights into how these leaders navigate internal and external constraints. Research often overlooks factors such as resource limitations, cultural resistance, and the complexities of coordinating across sectors like health and law enforcement, which are crucial in child-friendly initiatives. Furthermore, previous work has not sufficiently addressed how leadership roles encompass multiple functions—educator, manager, supervisor, innovator, and leader—in fostering child-friendly environments. Addressing these research gaps is vital for developing practical leadership models tailored to madrasahs, especially in regions like Indonesia where madrasahs play a pivotal role in Islamic education and social development.

This study offers a novel contribution by specifically focusing on the leadership roles of madrasah principals in implementing the Madrasah Ramah Anak program, emphasizing the systematic processes and multi-dimensional leadership functions involved. It highlights the integration of child rights principles with Islamic educational values, a state-of-the-art approach in educational leadership research. The study also examines the collaborative mechanisms between madrasahs and external sectors such as health centers and police, expanding the understanding of cross-sector partnerships in educational settings. By addressing both enabling factors and barriers, this research provides actionable insights for policymakers and practitioners aiming to promote inclusive, safe, and supportive learning environments in Islamic schools. This contribution is particularly important for advancing educational equity and child protection in regions with significant Muslim populations.

Given the complex challenges faced in implementing Child-Friendly Madrasah programs, this study seeks to answer: How does the leadership of madrasah principals influence the implementation, impact, and sustainability of the Madrasah Ramah Anak initiative? The research argues that effective leadership is pivotal not only in policy execution but also in fostering a positive school culture that supports student wellbeing. It also investigates what internal and external factors facilitate or hinder this process. By addressing these questions, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the leadership dynamics within Islamic education and offers evidence-based recommendations for improving child-friendly practices in madrasahs. The insights gained are expected to help optimize leadership strategies for educational reform aligned with children's best interests.

This research posits that madrasah principals, through their multifaceted leadership roles, act as catalysts for transforming madrasahs into child-friendly institutions that uphold children's rights and foster safe, inclusive learning environments. The study highlights the essential leadership competencies required to navigate challenges such as limited resources and resistance to change, emphasizing visionary leadership, collaboration, and innovation. By focusing on a successful case study, the research provides a model that can be adapted and scaled across other madrasahs. Ultimately, this work advances educational leadership theory and practice in Islamic education, supporting the development of schools that nurture not only academic excellence but also social-emotional wellbeing and moral integrity, aligned with global child rights agendas.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore in depth the role of madrasah principals' leadership in implementing the Child-Friendly Madrasah (Madrasah Ramah Anak) program. Qualitative research is suitable for understanding complex social phenomena by capturing behaviors, perceptions, motivations, and actions through descriptive language within a specific context (Moleong, 2013). Creswell (2007) further explains that qualitative methods allow researchers to gain profound insights into meanings, experiences, and social interactions occurring in the field. The case study approach was chosen because it enables intensive, detailed, and comprehensive examination of a particular subject or phenomenon within its real-life context (Arikunto, 2002). This approach prioritizes understanding the uniqueness of a single case over generalizing findings, focusing on how leadership practices unfold within a specific setting.

The research was conducted at Madrasah Tsanawiyah Negeri 3 Banyuwangi, selected for its exemplary implementation of the Child-Friendly Madrasah program, including policies such as anti-violence, no-smoking zones, and participatory student behavior management. This location provided a rich and relevant context to investigate the leadership dynamics in action, particularly given its recognition as a model madrasah in the region. Choosing this site allowed the study to capture practical leadership strategies and challenges in a setting actively engaged in child-friendly educational reforms.

Data collection involved multiple techniques to ensure comprehensive coverage and triangulation. Primary data were gathered through in-depth interviews with key informants including the madrasah principal, teachers, and relevant stakeholders. Direct observations were conducted on-site to document real-time interactions, environmental conditions, and program implementation processes. Additionally, documentary analysis was performed on institutional policies, program reports, and other relevant materials to enrich the understanding of leadership roles and program activities.

Data analysis followed the model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), which includes three interconnected stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data condensation involved selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming raw data to make them manageable and meaningful. The condensed data were then organized and presented in a coherent manner through narrative descriptions and matrices for clearer interpretation. The final phase involved drawing conclusions and verifying findings by cross-referencing the displayed data with emerging themes and patterns.

To ensure data validity and reliability, triangulation techniques were employed. Source triangulation was used by comparing information collected from different informants to confirm consistency. Technique triangulation involved cross-checking data obtained through interviews, observations, and documentation to minimize bias and strengthen credibility. These rigorous validation methods enhanced the trustworthiness of the study's findings and contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the madrasah principal's leadership in the Child-Friendly Madrasah program implementation.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The Leadership Role of the Madrasah Principal

The role of the madrasah principal stands at the forefront of efforts to enhance the quality of educational institutions. As the designated leader responsible for realizing educational goals, the principal embodies the central driving force of madrasah life. This leadership demands not only a thorough

understanding of their duties and functions but also genuine care and concern for both staff and students (Wahed, 2016). This responsibility is particularly evident in the implementation of educational programs within the institution.

The principal's influence is crucial in improving both the quality of education and student outcomes. The success of a school's educational process fundamentally hinges on the efficiency and effectiveness of the principal's leadership (Ratnawulan, 2023). As the school leader, the principal plays a pivotal role in mobilizing the vision, mission, and programs of the madrasah through leadership that is aligned with the work environment and supported by well-coordinated management. In today's educational management paradigm, the principal is expected to fulfill multiple roles: educator, manager, administrator, supervisor, leader, innovator, and motivator (Ridho, 2019). This multi-faceted leadership approach is exemplified by the principal of MTsN 3 Banyuwangi in successfully implementing the Child-Friendly Madrasah (MRA) program.

In the role of educator, the principal instills moral character values among all school members. A practical example is the daily morning habit of practicing the "4S" – Smile, Greet, Say Hello, and Be Courteous – at the school gate, where the principal personally welcomes students alongside teachers. This act models positive culture and warm communication within the school environment. As a manager, the principal strategically plans and coordinates the entire Child-Friendly Madrasah program, engaging teachers, education staff, and the madrasah committee. For instance, the Healthy and Child-Friendly Canteen initiative involves appointing a supervisory team from teachers, the school health unit, and students to ensure food safety and hygiene.

Functioning as an administrator, the principal guarantees that all programs have clear plans, implementation structures, schedules, and well-documented reports. Administrative coordination among teachers, staff, and students supports initiatives such as the Healthy Canteen, Child-Friendly Cooperative, and the "4S" habituation program. As a supervisor, the principal conducts regular monitoring of the school environment's cleanliness, the implementation of habitual activities, and student behavior both inside and outside the classroom. This supervisory role also ensures that teachers integrate child-friendly values into their teaching practices.

Demonstrating exemplary leadership, the principal adopts a participative and communicative style, providing teachers with the space to innovate. Furthermore, the principal actively forges partnerships with external institutions such as community health centers, police, and education offices to strengthen support in areas of child health, safety, and psychological well-being. The principal's innovative spirit is evident in creative activities,

including healthy menu competitions, educational campaigns against unhealthy snacks, and anti-bullying poster contests. These innovations not only boost student participation but also enhance the madrasah's image as a healthy and enjoyable learning environment.

Finally, as a motivator, the principal fosters enthusiasm and commitment among all members of the madrasah community to actively support the Child-Friendly Madrasah program. By encouraging and recognizing outstanding contributions from both teachers and students, the principal cultivates a positive, energetic atmosphere conducive to sustained program success.

Implementation of the Child-Friendly Madrasah (MRA) Program

The Child-Friendly Madrasah (MRA) program represents a significant initiative supported by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia as an extension of the Child-Friendly School program championed by the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (Kementerian PPPA). This program is anchored in formal regulation, specifically the Circular Letter of the Director General of Islamic Education Number B-86/DJ.I/PP.03/01 of 2022, which provides comprehensive guidelines for madrasahs to implement child-friendly educational principles. The policy prioritizes the protection of children within educational environments, ensuring their rights to grow, develop, and be free from all forms of violence, discrimination, and rights violations.

Among the pioneering institutions in Banyuwangi implementing the MRA program is Madrasah Tsanawiyah Negeri (MTsN) 3 Banyuwangi. The program's implementation began with a thorough preparation phase that involved extensive socialization efforts targeting the madrasah community, parents, and the surrounding neighborhood. These efforts aimed to raise awareness about child rights and protection, followed by mapping these rights through child consultations to formulate relevant policies. The planning stage included forming an implementation team tasked with identifying the madrasah's strengths, capacities, vulnerabilities, and threats. This team then defined clear objectives for the program by analyzing environmental factors such as human resource expertise, method selection, feasibility of media and infrastructure, curriculum readiness, and the level of parental and community participation.

Moreover, the MRA program at MTsN 3 Banyuwangi was deliberately integrated with existing policies and activities within the madrasah, such as the school health unit (UKS), healthy canteen initiatives, environmental programs (Adiwiyata), inclusive education, disaster-safe madrasah, and policies prohibiting smoking and narcotics. This holistic approach not only strengthens the program's foundation but also ensures sustainability and coherence with

the madrasah's broader educational mission.

A key factor in the program's success is the strategic collaboration with various external stakeholders, including local government sub-district offices, police sectors, military command units, community health centers, psychologists, and technology hubs such as Gubug IT. This extensive network of partnerships serves to fulfill the six essential components of the Child-Friendly Madrasah indicators: program policies, trained educators and staff, protection of children's rights, curriculum implementation, child participation, and engagement of parents, community organizations, businesses, and other relevant stakeholders.

The comprehensive implementation of the MRA program at MTsN 3 Banyuwangi demonstrates a proactive and well-coordinated effort to create a safe, nurturing, and inclusive educational environment. This program not only protects the rights of children but also actively involves the entire madrasah community and external partners in fostering a culture that supports child development and well-being. Through these efforts, MTsN 3 Banyuwangi has set a benchmark for other madrasahs aiming to cultivate a truly child-friendly educational setting.

The Impact of Madrasah Principal Leadership on the Child-Friendly Madrasah (MRA) Program

The success of the Child-Friendly Madrasah (MRA) program is closely intertwined with the pivotal role played by the head of the madrasah in its implementation. The findings reveal that the leadership of the headmaster has significantly contributed to the creation of a learning environment that is safe, clean, and healthy. Moreover, students have developed a heightened awareness of health, hygiene, and positive behavior. Notably, incidents of disciplinary violations and bullying have decreased substantially, fostering a collaborative culture among teachers, students, and the surrounding community. This positive transformation reflects the critical influence of effective leadership in shaping not only policies but also the day-to-day experiences of everyone within the madrasah.

These findings resonate strongly with Bass and Riggio's transformational leadership theory, as highlighted in Lamirin's research, which emphasizes that school leaders who inspire and empower their subordinates can drive meaningful and positive change within educational organizations (Lamirin et al., 2023). This suggests that the head of the madrasah transcends the role of a mere administrator to become a catalyst for change, prioritizing humanistic and spiritual values. Within the context of the Child-Friendly Madrasah, such leadership requires a delicate balance between moral guidance, managerial competence, and innovative vision. This integration transforms the madrasah

into more than just an educational institution—it becomes a nurturing space where children’s holistic well-being flourishes.

Furthermore, these results align with the findings of Izzah, Setianti, and Tiara, who argue that the success of the Child-Friendly Madrasah program heavily depends on a participatory and humane leadership style (Izzah et al., 2023). Therefore, the role of the head of the madrasah is undeniably influential and instrumental in ensuring the effective realization of the MRA program. Through such leadership, madrasahs can truly fulfill their mission as safe, inclusive, and empowering environments for children’s growth and development.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors of Madrasah Principal Leadership in the Implementation of the Child-Friendly Madrasah (MRA) Program

The research findings reveal that the successful implementation of the Child-Friendly Madrasah (MRA) program at MTsN 3 Banyuwangi is strongly supported by several key factors that enhance the effectiveness of the madrasah head’s leadership. One of the fundamental pillars is the solid foundation of policy and regulatory support. The head of the madrasah benefits from clear legal backing and regulatory frameworks issued by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the local Education Office. These regulations encourage the madrasah to foster a safe, healthy, and inclusive learning environment for students. Internal madrasah documents show that the MRA program is embedded within the institution’s goals for improving learning conditions and serves as a critical performance indicator. This supportive policy environment legitimizes the madrasah head’s efforts and provides a clear strategic direction for the effective planning and execution of the program.

Complementing this regulatory backing is the visionary leadership style demonstrated by the head of MTsN 3 Banyuwangi. The headmaster exemplifies a collaborative and participatory approach, fostering cross-sector cooperation and actively involving all members of the madrasah community. Innovative initiatives such as the Child-Friendly Healthy Canteen and the Child-Friendly Student Cooperative not only address the practical needs of students but also reinforce character education, health awareness, and self-reliance. This leadership style encourages teachers, staff, and students alike to engage fully and take ownership of cultivating a child-friendly culture throughout the institution.

The program’s success is further strengthened by robust collaboration with external stakeholders. Key partnerships with the local health center (puskesmas), police sector office, and parents or guardians contribute significantly to the program’s implementation. For example, the health center acts as a vital partner in delivering nutritional counseling and training on

healthy food management for the Healthy Canteen initiative. Such external cooperation enhances community awareness about health and safety, creating a more supportive environment for the entire school population.

Another vital contributing factor is the strong religious and humanistic culture cultivated within MTsN 3 Banyuwangi. The madrasah's daily practices, such as the 4S habit—Smile, Greet, Say Hello, and Be Polite—and morning greetings at the school gate, help to embed values of kindness and respect into the school culture. This Islamic-based ethos aligns seamlessly with the principles of child-friendly education, which emphasize respect for each child's dignity, rights, and individuality.

Equally important is the active participation of teachers and students in the program. Teachers take on dynamic roles as facilitators and mentors in child-friendly activities, engaging in anti-bullying literacy campaigns, monitoring canteen cleanliness, and guiding extracurricular programs. Meanwhile, students become agents of change through involvement in creative activities such as healthy menu competitions and other initiatives promoting a healthy lifestyle. This collaborative involvement fosters a collective sense of responsibility and ownership toward the program's success.

Despite these strengths, the implementation of the MRA program at MTsN 3 Banyuwangi faces several challenges. One major obstacle is the limitation of financial resources. The madrasah head encounters difficulties in securing sufficient funding to sustain MRA activities long-term. Government budgets often fall short of covering all program needs, such as acquiring child-friendly facilities, upgrading infrastructure, and conducting teacher training. Consequently, certain activities like healthy menu contests and anti-unhealthy snack campaigns rely heavily on the school's own resources and support from external partners.

Another challenge lies in the resistance from a small segment of teachers toward changes, especially regarding the adoption of child-friendly teaching methods that demand creativity and individualized approaches. This resistance often stems from differing perceptions of the child-friendly concept and insufficient professional development opportunities. To address this, the madrasah head must employ persuasive approaches and continuous supervision to build understanding and commitment among staff.

Infrastructure limitations also pose difficulties. Although basic facilities such as a health unit, healthy canteen, and student cooperative exist, some areas require further development to fully meet child-friendly standards. For instance, the lack of sufficient green open spaces and safe playgrounds creates hurdles in providing a comfortable environment that supports students' well-being.

Finally, maintaining consistency and sustainability of the program remains a concern. While some activities thrive during initial implementation, participation tends to decline in subsequent periods due to academic scheduling pressures. The madrasah head is therefore tasked with integrating MRA initiatives into the annual school program to ensure ongoing commitment and continuity.

In summary, the interplay of strong policy support, visionary and collaborative leadership, external stakeholder engagement, a nurturing religious culture, and active community participation has been instrumental in the success of the Madrasah Ramah Anak program at MTsN 3 Banyuwangi. Addressing financial constraints, resistance to change, infrastructure gaps, and sustaining program momentum will be critical for its future development and long-term impact.

CONCLUSION

The leadership of the madrasah head plays a pivotal role in the successful implementation of the Child-Friendly Madrasah (MRA) program at MTsN 3 Banyuwangi. Acting in multiple capacities—as educator, manager, administrator, supervisor, leader, innovator, and motivator—the headmaster has effectively fostered a safe, clean, and value-driven learning environment. This program has yielded significant positive outcomes, reflected not only in students' improved discipline and empathy but also in enhanced social interactions and overall school health. The success of the program largely stems from strong leadership commitment, cohesive internal collaboration, and robust external support. At the same time, challenges such as limited funding and gaps in teachers' understanding highlight areas needing attention to optimize program execution.

One of the most important lessons learned from this study is that transformative leadership is essential for embedding child-friendly principles into educational institutions. The holistic approach taken by the madrasah head demonstrates that leadership extending beyond administrative duties to embrace moral guidance, innovation, and motivation can create meaningful change that nurtures students' well-being and character development. This insight reinforces the importance of leadership as a dynamic and multifaceted force in educational reform.

From a scholarly perspective, this research contributes valuable knowledge by linking theoretical leadership concepts with practical applications in the unique context of Islamic educational institutions implementing child protection frameworks. It enriches the academic discourse on educational leadership by showcasing how visionary and participatory

leadership can drive social and cultural change within madrasahs, an area that remains underexplored in the broader literature.

Nevertheless, the study is limited by its focus on a single madrasah, which may affect the generalizability of the findings across diverse educational settings. Additionally, reliance on qualitative data poses challenges in measuring the long-term impact quantitatively. Future research could build on this foundation by conducting comparative studies across multiple madrasahs and incorporating mixed-method approaches to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of the Child-Friendly Madrasah program's effectiveness and scalability.

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