

Rethinking Institutional Identity in Religion-Based Schools: Policy Challenges from MDTA Jambi

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Received: 14/08/2025

Revised: 26/11/2025

Accepted: 31/12/2025

Abstract

This study examines the absence of institutional vision and policy in *Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliah* Awaliyah (MDTA) in Jambi and analyzes its implications for institutional sustainability. This topic is important because MDTA operates under flexible and general regulations, making internal vision and policy crucial for ensuring organizational direction and long-term viability. The research aims to identify the factors contributing to the lack of vision and policy formulation and to assess their impact on the sustainability of MDTA institutions. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through direct observation, in-depth interviews with the principals of *Madrasah* Misbahussadah and *Madrasah* Raudatul Islamiyah in Jambi, and a document analysis of MDTA regulations issued by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, as well as relevant literature. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The study reveals three main findings. First, MDTA principals lack a comprehensive and formally documented institutional vision, while policies are largely based on personal experience rather than systematic planning. Second, the absence of vision is driven by limited awareness of its strategic importance, inadequate institutional resources and support, and the lack of training in vision and policy formulation. Third, this condition results in weak institutional direction, reduced attractiveness for qualified teachers, uncertainty in decision-making, and challenges to institutional sustainability. The study emphasizes the significance of structured vision development and policy-making in enhancing MDTA governance. Future research is encouraged to explore capacity-building models and policy interventions to support the sustainable management of religion-based educational institutions in Indonesia.

Keywords

Education Policy; Institutional Identity Crisis; *Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliah*; *Madrasah* Vision

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1. INTRODUCTION

Madrasahs in Indonesia should be understood as indigenous educational institutions that emerged from the societal milieu itself, rather than as structures imposed from external sources (Rawis et al., 2021). Its existence is a response to the need for strong Islamic religious education, which is often not fully met by the formal education system (Muzakki & Nurdin, 2022). In each region, people have their own name for this institution (Pratama Arizqi et al., 2025). In Aceh, it is called a “*dayah*”; in



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Minangkabau, it is known as a “*surau*”; and in Java, it is more commonly referred to as a “*pesantren*.” (Ahmad, 2015). Although the names and forms are diverse, they all have the same goal: to become centers of Islamic religious education that are deeply rooted in the lives of the people. To maintain a balance between general education and religious education, the state provides recognition through Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System (Law Of The Republic of Indonesia Number 20 of 2003 Concerning the National Education System, 2023). The regulation recognizes non-formal education, including religious education such as *Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliyah* (MDT), as part of the national education system. MDT is a non-formal Islamic educational unit that provides religious instruction to elementary school children and their equivalents, as a complement to the formal education they receive in the morning (Yugo et al., 2024).

Karel A. Steenbrink once stated that MDT was a form of community attention to the need for religious education outside school hours. Not only as a complement, but this *Madrasah* also aims to instill Islamic character, good morals, and national insight in children from an early age (Ashari et al., 2023). The government also confirmed its support by issuing the Minister of Religion Regulation Number 13 of 2014 and the MDT implementation guideline book issued by the Directorate of Early Childhood Education and Islamic Boarding Schools (Indonesian Ministry of Religion Team, 2014).

However, the reality on the ground is far from ideal. In various places, particularly in Jambi Province, MDTs often operate under conditions that are far from ideal. Many of these institutions face multiple challenges, including limited facilities, a small student body, inadequate teaching qualifications, and ineffective curriculum implementation. In many cases, communities are starting to lose interest in sending their children to MDTs. Some even describe the existence of these Islamic schools as “there but not felt” (*wujuduhu ka’adamih*).

An example is the Misbahussa’dah Islamic Boarding School in Rantau Alai Village, Merangin Regency. The teaching staff there are mostly graduates of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*)’s junior high or high school; the curriculum doesn’t fully adhere to Ministry of Religious Affairs guidelines, and the leadership lacks a clear strategic direction (Iskandar, Head of MDTA Misbahussa’adah, interview May 13, 2023, tt). On the other hand, MDT Raudhatul Islamiyah in Aurgading Village, Sarolangun Regency, actually shows a different kind of enthusiasm, with a large number of students and high parental enthusiasm. However, upon closer examination, the governance remains weak because it is based solely on personal experience, rather than a written and structured management system.

Behind all this, there’s a common thread that seems to be at the root of the problem: the lack of a clear institutional vision and *Madrasah* policies. A vision is a kind of compass for an organization. It determines the direction the institution will take and how its members will collaborate (Rozikin et al., 2020). Caleb Rosado defines a vision as a realistic, credible, and inspiring picture of the future. Without a clear vision, an institution runs aimlessly, lacking clear policies, and decision-making becomes reactive and inconsistent.

Among educational institutions, Islamic religious institutions that still exist and develop today include *Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliyah*, which maintains its original characteristics as a center for religious education in the community, reflecting the spirit of its initial founding (Radita & Asbari, 2024). *Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliyah* is an embodiment of traditional Islamic education, which originated as a prayer room educational institution that employed a classical system approach (Iswantir et al., 2025).

In the history of Islamic education, the *Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliyah* initially emerged and developed in response to the community’s growing awareness and enthusiasm for the importance of Islamic religious learning. On that basis, it has led this *Madrasah* towards renewal in Islamic education. One form of renewal is the birth of several *Madrasah Diniyah*, such as the *Madrasah Diniyah* (Diniyah School) founded by Zainuddin Labai al Yunusi in 1915 and the *Madrasah Diniyah Putri*, founded by Rangkyo Rahmah El Yunusiah in 1923.

In line with the development and growing need for the existence of *Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliyah*, the government has formally recognized this institution as an integral part of the national education system. It has mandated that its implementation be regulated through laws and statutory provisions. The legal foundations governing *Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliyah* are rooted in Article 31 paragraph (1) of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, Government Regulation of the Republic of Indonesia Number 55 of 2007 concerning Religious Education and Religious Instruction, Government Regulation of the Republic of Indonesia Number 74 of 2008 concerning Teachers, Regulation of the Minister of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia Number 13 of 2014 concerning Islamic Religious Education, as well as the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Education Number 7131 of 2014, which revises the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Education Number 2347 of 2012 concerning the Guidelines for the Implementation of *Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliyah*.

Article 31, paragraph 3 of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia states that the government shall endeavor to establish and implement a national education system that fosters faith, piety, and noble character, thereby enriching the nation's life, as regulated by law. Therefore, the principle of national education in Indonesia is to "increase faith, piety, and noble character." This is the essence and characteristic of national education, which is based on religious values in accordance with the philosophy of Pancasila, serving as the foundation of the nation and state (INDONESIA, 2003).

Robbins and Coulter also emphasized that in every organization, including educational institutions, leadership plays a crucial role in determining direction, quality, and sustainability (Robbins, S. P., & Coulter, 2012). When *Madrasah* principals lack a long-term perspective, the institution tends to stagnate and struggle to grow. This is reinforced by research showing that the biggest problem with MDTs lies not just in quantity, but rather in the quality of human resources, who are not yet ready to play a strategic role in institutional management (Hakim, 2019).

Based on these realities and reflections, this paper aims to explore how the vision and policies are actually implemented in the Jambi MDT. This research aims to explore the existing vision and policies, identify the causes of their limitations, and understand their impact on the existence and development of the MDT.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative case study design to explore in depth and holistically the policy-related challenges involved in maintaining institutional identity at *Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliyah Awaliyah* (MDTA) within the selected research sites. The case study approach was chosen because it is well-suited to examining contemporary phenomena in their real-life contexts, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined. The research was conducted in Muaro Jambi Regency, Jambi Province, with a focus on MDTA institutions located in Suka Maju Village and Teluk Jambu Village. These locations were selected due to the continued operation of MDTA institutions that experience considerable pressure from the formal education system. Field data collection was conducted over three months, from mid-May to late July 2024.

The study involved twelve participants who were selected based on their capacity to provide in-depth information regarding MDTA operations, policies, and institutional identity. The participants comprised MDTA administrators or directors as key actors in institutional policymaking and vision development, MDTA teachers as frontline practitioners directly engaged in student learning and curriculum implementation, parents of students as stakeholders who directly experience the outcomes and values of MDTA education, and local community and religious leaders who possess a deep understanding of the social context and the role of MDTA within the community. The selection of participants initially employed purposive sampling, particularly for MDTA administrators and

teachers, based on their depth of knowledge and experience related to MDTA institutional dynamics. Purposive sampling is suitable for qualitative case studies because it allows for the selection of information-rich participants who are directly relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). To enrich the data from the perspectives of parents and community leaders, snowball sampling was subsequently applied, whereby initial informants were asked to recommend other individuals considered knowledgeable about the research context. This technique is effective for accessing key informants through existing social networks, especially in limited or closely knit community settings (Noy, 2008). The combination of purposive and snowball sampling strengthened data depth and contextual validity rather than aiming for statistical representativeness.

Table 1. Profile of Research Participant

Participant Role	n	Age Range (years)	Professional Experience
MDTA Administrators	3	45–60	15 years
MDTA Teachers	4	28–55	8 years
Parents of MDTA Students	3	35–50	Children enrolled for 2–4 years
Community and Religious Leaders	2	50–65	Not applicable

Data collection in this study employed several instruments to ensure the collection of comprehensive and credible data. A semi-structured interview guide was developed, consisting of open-ended questions organized around core themes. These included understanding of the MDTA's institutional identity and mission, operational policies such as teacher recruitment, curriculum, and financial management, as well as internal and external challenges faced by the institution, along with strategies for adaptation and institutional sustainability. In addition, observation sheets were used to systematically document teaching and learning activities, the physical conditions and facilities of the *Madrasah*, social interactions among stakeholders, and visible religious symbols within the MDTA environment. Documentary data were also collected and analyzed for triangulation purposes, encompassing organizational structures, MDTA curricula, teacher and student attendance records, meeting minutes, and correspondence with relevant external institutions.

The sampling technique applied in this study was purposive sampling, which was used to select initial informants, particularly MDTA administrators and teachers, based on their depth of knowledge and experience regarding the institutional dynamics of MDTA. Purposive sampling is suitable for qualitative case studies, as it enables the selection of information-rich participants who are directly relevant to the research objectives (Creswell, 2017; Patton, 2015). To complement data from parents and community leaders, snowball sampling was subsequently employed, whereby initial informants recommended other individuals considered knowledgeable about the research context. This technique is effective for accessing key informants through existing social networks, especially within limited or closely knit community settings (Noy, 2008). The combination of purposive and snowball sampling enhanced the depth of the data and the contextual validity of the findings, rather than aiming for statistical representativeness.

Data analysis in this study followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which involves the interrelated processes of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data reduction was carried out simultaneously with data collection. All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, while observational notes and documentary data were systematically organized and compiled. The researcher then conducted manual open coding to identify initial codes, phrases, or concepts emerging from the raw data, such as “overlapping curriculum,” “volunteer teachers,” and “identity as a moral fortress.” These initial codes were subsequently grouped into more abstract categories through axial coding to identify relationships among categories, for

example, linking the category “pressure from the formal education system” with subcategories such as “erosion of learning time” and “competition with public schools.”

To facilitate interpretation, the reduced data were displayed in the form of matrices, relational charts, and thematic networks. For instance, matrices were developed to compare perceptions of MDTA institutional identity among administrators, teachers, and parents. Based on the displayed data, conclusion drawing was conducted through selective coding to identify the core category that formed the central storyline of the study, namely “institutional identity struggle.” The emerging conclusions were continuously verified throughout the research process by seeking both supporting and contradictory evidence through negative case analysis, as well as through source triangulation involving teachers, parents, and documents, and method triangulation using interviews, observations, and documentation.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings

Status of Vision and Institutional Policy in MDTA

Field findings indicate that MDTA institutions in the research locations lack a comprehensive and formally documented institutional vision. At *Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliah Misbahussadah*, the principal acknowledged that the vision was not clearly formulated and existed only in the form of brief notes without systematic documentation. There was no written vision displayed in the *Madrasah* office or used as a formal reference for program planning. The vision was created solely to complete reports for the Ministry of Religious Affairs and submit assistance proposals. It was not seriously discussed as a guide for developing the *Madrasah*.” (*Head of MDTA Misbahussadah, interview, May 13, 2023*).

Observations confirmed the absence of vision and mission statements in institutional documents, classrooms, or administrative spaces. Daily activities were carried out based on routine practices rather than strategic planning. In contrast, *Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliah Raudatul Islamiyah* demonstrated a different pattern. Although this *Madrasah* did not have a formally written vision, the principal articulated a clear, implicit vision rooted in personal educational experiences and religious values transmitted by previous teachers. “I do not have a written vision, but I know clearly what kind of students this *Madrasah* should produce” (*Head of MDTA Raudatul Islamiyah, interview, May 15, 2023*). This implicit vision was communicated verbally during teachers’ meetings and informal discussions and periodically evaluated at the end of each semester. Observation data showed that this *Madrasah* maintained relatively stable student enrollment and learning quality.

Factors Contributing to the Absence of a Formal Vision and Policy

Several interrelated factors influenced the absence of a comprehensive institutional vision and formal policies. *First*, the limited awareness and capacity of *Madrasah* leadership played a significant role. Principals and administrators reported minimal exposure to training or guidance on institutional planning and vision formulation.

Second, limited welfare and institutional support affected managerial performance. Principals and teachers expressed feelings of neglect due to low financial incentives and inadequate operational facilities. “Sometimes we feel forgotten. Even daily needs such as teaching tools and basic facilities are very limited.” (*Teacher, MDTA Misbahussadah, interview, May 2023*).

Third, findings revealed weak institutional guidance from relevant authorities. There was limited technical assistance and structured mentoring available in areas such as governance, policy development, and long-term planning. As a result, institutional management relied heavily on individual experience rather than formal policy frameworks.

The *Madrasah* principal's policy of attracting children to *Madrasahs* is evident in several phenomena. These phenomena are based on the *Madrasah's* geographic location. *Madrasahs* located in district cities differ from those located in rural areas. This difference lies in the motivation of children and parents who entrust their children to these institutions. Urban communities are more enthusiastic about enrolling their children in *Madrasah Diniyah* compared to rural communities. Many variables influence the enthusiasm of urban communities and the low interest of rural communities. Therefore, the challenges facing urban and rural *Madrasahs* differ, and the policies adopted by *Madrasah* principals vary accordingly. *Madrasahs* in rural areas have implemented policies that include reducing tuition fees, and some even waive tuition fees. This is done to ease the financial burden on parents and attract parents to entrust their children to their *Madrasah*. *Madrasah* principals in urban areas prioritize promoting the quality of their *Madrasah* by sending their students to participate in various competitions at both the village and district levels.

Institutional Impact of the Vision and Policy Gap

The lack of a formal vision and institutional policy had tangible impacts on the sustainability and development of MDTA. At MDTA Misbahussadah, the absence of strategic direction was linked to declining student enrollment and a decline in learning quality over the past decade. Both the principal and local religious leaders acknowledged this condition. "In the past, many students studied here, but now the number continues to decrease." (Community religious leader, interview, May 2023).

Teachers also reported uncertainty in decision-making, particularly regarding curriculum development and program innovation. Without a clear institutional direction, initiatives tended to be short-term and reactive in nature. Conversely, MDTA Raudatul Islamiyah showed that an implicit but consistently implemented vision could partially mitigate these challenges. Supported by community trust and local government assistance through *Madrasah* Operational Assistance (BOM), this *Madrasah* demonstrated relatively better institutional performance in terms of student numbers and learning environment. Table 2 summarizes the relationship between the presence of vision and institutional outcomes:

Table 2. The Relationship Between the Presence of Vision and Institutional Outcomes

<i>Madrasah</i>	Vision Status	Institutional Outcome
MDTA Misbahussadah	No written or coherent vision	Declining enrollment and quality
MDTA Raudatul Islamiyah	Implicit, orally communicated vision	Stable enrollment and learning quality

Informal Policy Practices as Survival Strategies

Despite the absence of formalized vision and policy documents, MDTA principals implemented several informal policies to sustain institutional operations. These policies emerged primarily in two areas. *First*, in the recruitment of teaching staff, principals relied on personal networks and voluntary commitment. Most teachers were recruited from *pesantren* alums without strict academic qualification requirements. *Second*, regarding student recruitment, different strategies were observed based on geographical context. Rural MDTA reduced or waived tuition fees to attract students, while urban MDTA emphasized participation in religious competitions to enhance institutional visibility. "We send students to competitions so people can see the quality of this *Madrasah*." (Head of MDTA Raudatul Islamiyah, interview, May 15, 2023). These strategies functioned as adaptive mechanisms rather than structured policies and depended heavily on individual leadership capacity.

Discussion

Status of Institutional Vision in Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliyah

The findings reveal a structural weakness in the formulation and institutionalization of vision

within *Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliyah* (MDTA). In both cases examined, the vision does not function as a formal strategic instrument. MDTA Misbahussadah demonstrates an absence of a coherent written vision, while MDTA Raudatul Islamiyah relies on an implicit, leader-centered vision transmitted informally through daily practices. This condition reflects what Bryson (2001) identifies as “vision without institutional ownership,” where leadership ideals fail to translate into organizational commitments.

So, in relation to the internal policy of the *Madrasah* principal to overcome the deficiencies and challenges in this *Madrasah*, the *Madrasah* principal made a simple policy, even though it did not meet the criteria for formulating a correct and appropriate policy as according to David C. Paris and David K. Cohen in their book entitled “Education Policy Implementation”, the theory of educational management policy includes three stages, namely the policy formulation stage, the policy implementation stage, and the policy evaluation stage. If we refer to the theory above, it is certainly not perfect in formulating *Madrasah* policies. However, the *Madrasah* principals have implemented a policy that they consider innovative to ensure the institution's continued existence and to foster community trust and enthusiasm for entrusting their children to it (Abror & Nisa, 2024).

From an organizational perspective, vision is not merely a symbolic statement but a strategic device that shapes policy priorities, resource allocation, and performance evaluation. The lack of a written vision suggests that MDTA leadership tends to equate continuity of routine activities with institutional sustainability. Similar patterns have been documented in non-formal Islamic educational institutions where tradition and charisma substitute for formal planning mechanisms. This study reinforces the argument that without codification, vision remains personal and fragile, particularly when leadership changes occur.

Factors Contributing to the Absence of Vision and Policy

A multitude of interrelated factors shape the absence of vision and policy in MDTA. At the leadership level, principals often demonstrate a limited understanding of vision as a strategic management tool. This finding supports Rosado’s assertion that educational institutions lacking visionary leadership are prone to stagnation and eventual decline. Rather than conceptualizing vision as a long-term institutional compass, principals tend to treat it as an administrative requirement for reporting or funding proposals.

At the structural level, inadequate welfare support for teachers and administrators has a significant impact on organizational motivation. Herzberg’s motivation-hygiene theory explains that poor working conditions and insufficient compensation suppress intrinsic motivation, thereby discouraging innovation and policy formulation. Moreover, the lack of systematic guidance from local and central government agencies exacerbates managerial uncertainty (Vroom, 1964). While MDTA enjoys strong legal recognition, policy implementation remains vague, particularly regarding non-formal education standards (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984).

Policies can be divided into public and private policies. Public policy is a collective action implemented through legitimate government authority to encourage, inhibit, prohibit, or regulate private actions (including those of individuals or private institutions). Public policy has two main characteristics. First, it is created or processed by government institutions or based on procedures established by the government. Second, it is coercive or influences the private actions of the wider community (the public). For example, fuel pricing policy is considered a public policy because it is coercive and can significantly impact the economic lives of the population, including consumers and businesses.

Another critical factor is the absence of participatory mechanisms in the creation of vision. Effective vision development requires collective engagement of stakeholders; however, MDTA management largely excludes teachers, parents, and community figures from structured planning processes. This

aligns with Jones's (2019) findings that unclear role distribution and weak governance structures hinder institutional coherence in community-based education systems.

Institutional Impact of Vision and Policy Vacuums

The findings indicate that the lack of vision and policy produces both immediate and long-term institutional consequences. Strategically, MDTA operates without clear benchmarks for success, resulting in fragmented program development and reactive decision-making. Bryson (2001) emphasizes that institutions without a clear vision struggle to align their daily activities with long-term objectives, a condition evident in MDTA's declining student enrollment and inconsistent educational quality.

At the identity level, MDTA experiences erosion of its distinctive role as a moral and religious educational institution. Without a clear vision articulating its unique contribution, MDTA risks becoming indistinguishable from other informal religious learning spaces. This identity dilution undermines public trust and weakens stakeholder commitment, a concern echoed by Alfiansyah et al. (2020).

Furthermore, the absence of written policies generates managerial uncertainty. Teachers and staff often rely on oral traditions and personal discretion, which can lead to inconsistencies and conflicts. Organizational theory suggests that written policies serve as stabilizing mechanisms, preserving institutional memory and ensuring continuity beyond individual leadership (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984). Without such mechanisms, MDTA's sustainability remains highly vulnerable.

Adaptive Strategies and Informal Policy Practices

Despite these structural constraints, MDTA principals exhibit adaptive capacity through informal policy practices. Flexible recruitment of teachers, adjustment of tuition fees, locally tailored curricula, and reliance on community or village government support represent pragmatic responses to institutional limitations. These strategies resonate with the concept of "street-level policy implementation," where leaders exercise discretion to maintain organizational survival (Lipsky, 2010).

The lack of a formal vision and policy in Islamic educational institutions, particularly *Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliah* Awaliyah, poses a significant threat to the development of educational institutions, both in terms of input and output. Furthermore, numerous modern Islamic educational institutions have emerged, offering diverse learning models and innovative approaches to education. According to Caleb Rosada, if an educational organization lacks a clear vision and established policies, it is likely to fail and become extinct (Caleb Rosado, 1997).

However, while such adaptability demonstrates resilience, it also reveals the limitations of informal governance. The absence of evaluation frameworks and documentation prevents systematic learning and institutional improvement. This finding extends existing literature by illustrating that informal innovation in non-formal Islamic education can sustain operations in the short term but lacks the structural strength required for long-term development and competitiveness (Iswantir et al., 2025; Yugo et al., 2024). Overall, this study contributes to the discourse on Islamic educational management by highlighting the paradox between strong legal legitimacy and weak institutional capacity within MDTA. The findings suggest that policy recognition alone is insufficient; it must be accompanied by leadership capacity building, participatory vision development, and formalization of internal policies to ensure sustainable institutional growth.

4. CONCLUSION

This study addressed three research objectives. First, it found that *Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliah* (MDT) in Muaro Jambi generally lacks a formally articulated and documented institutional vision and policy framework; implicit values and the personal discretion of principals largely guide governance.

Second, the absence of vision and policy is caused by limited managerial awareness, weak institutional support, inadequate leadership training, and structural constraints related to the non-formal status of MDT. Third, these conditions have direct implications for institutional sustainability, including a weakened organizational identity, inconsistent decision-making, declining attractiveness to qualified teachers, and a limited capacity to adapt to contemporary educational demands.

The findings contribute to the theoretical discourse on educational leadership by highlighting the relevance of vision-based governance within non-formal Islamic education contexts. This area remains underexplored in existing literature. Practically, this study provides empirical evidence that can inform policymakers and MDT leaders in strengthening leadership capacity, institutional planning, and governance mechanisms to enhance the long-term viability of MDT. However, this research is limited by its focus on a single regional case and qualitative methodology. Future research is encouraged to employ comparative or mixed-methods designs across broader geographical contexts to examine further the relationship between leadership, policy formulation, and institutional sustainability in *Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliyah*.

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