

INNOVATION STRATEGIES OF PRIVATE MADRASAH ALIYAH PRINCIPALS IN REALIZING SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the innovation strategies of private Madrasah Aliyah principals in realizing sustainable education. The study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method to understand the experiences and leadership practices of madrasah principals in designing and implementing educational innovations. The research was conducted at three private Islamic high schools, namely MAS Nurul Huda Sukaraja, MAS Al-Ikhlas Pametung Basuki, and MAS YPI Sumberharjo in Ogan Komering Ulu Timur Regency, South Sumatra Province, which were selected purposively based on the sustainability of innovation programs and the active involvement of madrasah principals in policy-making. The research data consisted of the innovation strategies of private Madrasah Aliyah principals in realizing sustainable education, which included academic innovation, religious innovation, and vocational innovation, as well as the leadership experiences of madrasah principals in designing and implementing these strategies. Data collection techniques were carried out through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation studies, and then analyzed thematically through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results of the study show that the madrasah principals' innovation strategies were developed through three main orientations, namely academic innovation, religious innovation, and vocational innovation. Academic innovation focuses on improving the quality of learning and the continuity of graduates' studies to higher education, religious innovation is directed at strengthening Islamic values and the social role of alumni, while vocational innovation emphasizes the development of life skills to increase the independence and competitiveness of graduates in the world of work. These three strategies are implemented contextually in accordance with the characteristics of the madrasah and the needs of the environment. This study concludes that the innovation strategies of private Madrasah Aliyah principals contribute significantly to the realization of sustainable education, thus emphasizing the importance of innovative leadership in the development of Islamic education that is adaptive and relevant to the demands of the times.

Keywords

Madrasah Principal, Private Madrasah Aliyah, Sustainable Education, Innovation Strategy.



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INTRODUCTION

Continuing education is a strategic issue in the development of education systems, especially in responding to the challenges of increasingly dynamic social, economic, and cultural changes (Navaridas-Nalda et al., 2020). Education is no longer understood solely as a process of knowledge transfer, but as a systematic effort to build the capacity of learners to survive, adapt, and contribute sustainably to society (Wu & Shen, 2022; Omotosho & Yassim, 2024). Therefore, educational institutions are required to develop innovative practices that are not only oriented towards short-term achievements but also ensure the sustainability of education quality in the long term (Holst et al., 2025; Elkaleh et al., 2025).

Private Madrasah Aliyah has a strategic position in the Islamic education system because it plays a role in shaping a generation that is academically superior and has a strong religious and social foundation (Hojeij, 2024; Fadhil et al., 2025). However, reality shows that private madrasahs often face various limitations, such as limited resources, low institutional competitiveness, and increasingly complex community demands for graduate quality (Nikma et al., 2023; Tawary, 2021). This condition places madrasahs in a situation that demands continuous breakthroughs and innovations in order to remain relevant and trusted by the community (Azizah Rena Widyastuti, 2024).

In the context of Private Madrasah Aliyah in Ogan Komering Ulu Timur Regency, South Sumatra Province, these challenges are evident. Based on preliminary observations and interviews with the principals and teachers at MAS Nurul Huda Sukaraja, MAS Al-Ikhlash Pametung Basuki, and MAS YPI Sumberharjo in East Ogan Komering Ulu Regency, South Sumatra Province, it was found that most madrasahs face limitations in financial resources, learning facilities and infrastructure, and a lack of external policy support. Madrasah administrative data shows that of the 17 subdistricts that have private Madrasah Aliyah in East Ogan Komering Ulu Regency, only three madrasahs have more than 200 students and have been able to maintain relatively stable institutional sustainability over the past five years. This condition shows the disparity in quality and sustainability between madrasahs, while also indicating the strategic role of madrasah leadership in maintaining the existence and quality of education in a sustainable manner.

The innovation strategies of the principals of private Madrasah Aliyah in East Ogan Komering Ulu Regency have developed in diverse and contextual characteristics. Field observations and in-depth interviews show that the principals of MAS Nurul Huda Sukaraja, MAS Al-Ikhlash

Pametung Basuki, and MAS YPI Sumberharjo have not only developed innovations in academic aspects but also integrated religious and vocational dimensions in response to the needs of students and the social environment. These innovation strategies include strengthening the quality of learning, instilling Islamic values in the madrasah culture, and developing life skills and independence among graduates. However, the implementation of these innovation strategies is not always linear and faces various dynamics at the institutional level.

Factors supporting the implementation of the madrasah principal's innovation strategy include participatory leadership, the involvement of teachers and educational staff in policy formulation, and the support of the community and educational foundations. Conversely, the inhibiting factors encountered include limited funding, minimal access to continuing professional training for teachers, and education policies that are not yet fully supportive of strengthening private Madrasah Aliyah. These factors have direct implications for the effectiveness of innovation strategies in realizing sustainable education.

The impact of the madrasah principal's innovation strategy on the sustainability of the quality of education at the private Madrasah Aliyah in East Ogan Komering Ulu Regency can be seen from several aspects. Based on madrasah academic data and interview results, MAS Nurul Huda Sukaraja and MAS Al-Ikhlas Pametung Basuki showed an increase in the number of graduates continuing their studies to higher education in the last three years, while MAS YPI Sumberharjo showed a strengthening of vocational skills programs based on local needs. Managerially, innovation encourages more adaptive and participatory madrasah governance. In terms of character, observations of madrasah religious activities show a strengthening of the internalization of Islamic values, independence, and social responsibility among students as part of a sustainable education strategy.

Various previous studies have examined the leadership of school principals or madrasah heads in improving the quality of education. Research by (Andrew et al., 2025) and (Day et al., 2016) shows that innovative leadership by school principals has an effect on improving the quality of learning, but has not explicitly linked it to the framework of sustainable education. Research by Norman et al. (2025) confirms that innovative leadership contributes to changes in school organizational culture, but focuses on the context of public schools. Studies (Nafi & Suharto, 2024; N. Sari et al., 2021) found that resource constraints are a major obstacle to innovation in private educational institutions, without exploring the adaptive strategies of institutional leaders. Research

(Qi et al., 2025; O'Shea, 2021) emphasizes the importance of religious leadership in Islamic education, but has not integrated the vocational dimension as part of educational sustainability. Meanwhile, (Fix et al., 2020) and (Ho, 2026) examined the managerial innovation of madrasah principals, but it was still partial and did not use a phenomenological approach.

From the five previous studies, there appears to be a research gap, namely the absence of a comprehensive study mapping the innovation strategies of private Madrasah Aliyah principals by integrating academic, religious, and vocational innovation within the framework of sustainable education, particularly in the context of private madrasahs in rural areas. The novelty of this study lies in its holistic analysis of madrasah principals' innovation strategies as a single unit of sustainable leadership using a phenomenological approach that explores leadership experiences and practices in depth from the perspective of the actors.

This study aims to analyze how the innovation strategies of private Madrasah Aliyah principals are designed and implemented in order to realize sustainable education in Ogan Komering Ulu Timur Regency, South Sumatra Province. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the scientific knowledge of Islamic educational leadership by offering a model of innovation strategies for madrasah principals based on sustainability. Pragmatically, the results of this study are expected to serve as a practical reference for madrasah principals, foundations, and Islamic education policy makers in formulating adaptive, innovative, and long-term policies and practices for managing private Madrasah Aliyah.

METHOD

This research is qualitative in nature with a phenomenological approach. It aims to explain and understand the innovation strategies of private Madrasah Aliyah principals in realizing sustainable education in East Ogan Komering Ulu Regency, South Sumatra Province. The phenomenological approach was used to explore the experiences, meanings, and leadership practices of madrasah principals in designing and implementing contextual educational innovations (Sugiyono, 2017). This research was conducted at three private Madrasah Aliyah, namely MAS Nurul Huda Sukaraja, MAS Al-Ikhlas Pametung Basuki, and MAS YPI Sumberharjo. The research data consisted of data on the innovation strategies of madrasah principals, the forms and characteristics of academic, religious, and vocational innovations, factors supporting and inhibiting

the implementation of innovation, and the impact of innovation strategies on the sustainability of madrasah education quality. The data were obtained from sources relevant to the research needs.

Data collection techniques were carried out through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation studies (Moleong, 2019). The research data sources included the madrasah principal as the main informant, as well as the deputy principal, teachers, and educational staff as supporting informants. In addition, official madrasah documents such as the vision and mission, work program, curriculum, activity reports, and madrasah policy archives were used as documentary data sources (Miles, 2014). Data analysis used the thematic analysis method (Radlinski & Craswell, 2022). Data analysis was carried out through the steps of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The researcher conducted a critical analysis of the madrasah principal's innovation strategies in realizing sustainable education by linking them to theories of Islamic educational leadership, educational innovation, and sustainable education. Furthermore, the research findings were compared with the results of previous relevant studies to strengthen the interpretation and depth of the analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The results show that the innovation strategies of private Madrasah Aliyah principals in realizing sustainable education in East Ogan Komering Ulu Regency, South Sumatra Province, were developed through adaptive, participatory, and long-term leadership. Innovation is understood not as incidental technical changes, but as a consciously designed leadership process to maintain the sustainability of the institution, the quality of education, and the competitiveness of madrasahs amid limited resources.

Field findings reveal that the innovation strategies of madrasah principals focus on three main orientations, namely academic innovation, religious innovation, and vocational innovation. These three orientations are integrated and implemented contextually in accordance with the characteristics of the madrasah's educational system and the needs of the surrounding environment. A summary of the field findings on the innovation strategies of madrasah principals is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Innovation Strategies of Private Madrasah Aliyah Principals in Realizing Sustainable Education in East Ogan Komering Ulu Regency

No	Innovation Orientation	Form of Innovation Strategy	Implementation in Madrasah	Contribution to Sustainable Education
1.	Academic	Strengthening the quality of learning and academic mentoring	Application of active learning, mentoring of final year students, and competency-based evaluation	Sustaining academic quality and increasing opportunities for further study
2.	Religion	Internalization of Islamic values in madrasah culture	Programs for religious practice, character building, and integrated religious activities	Sustainability of values, madrasah identity, and social legitimacy
3.	Vocational	Development of life skills and entrepreneurship	Skill training based on local potential, external cooperation	Economic sustainability of graduates and independence after graduation

Source: Field research findings (2025)

Based on Table 1, academic innovation is the main strategy developed by the head of the Private Madrasah Aliyah in East Ogan Komering Ulu Regency. This strategy is realized through strengthening the quality of learning by encouraging teachers to apply active learning and competency-based evaluation. In addition, the madrasah principal initiated an academic mentoring program for final year students to improve their readiness to continue their education to a higher level. The implementation of this strategy has had an impact on increasing public trust in madrasahs and stabilizing the number of students as an indicator of institutional sustainability.

Religious innovation has become a strategic orientation that serves to strengthen the identity of private Islamic high schools. The principal has developed religious innovation not only in the form of ritual activities, but also through the internalization of Islamic values into the madrasah's culture of Islamic values in daily life. Programs to encourage worship, strengthen morals, and religious activities involving the madrasah community and the surrounding community are practiced consistently. This strategy contributes to the formation of a positive image of the madrasah, increased social trust, and the sustainability of Islamic values in the lives of students.

Meanwhile, vocational innovation is developed in response to the reality that not all Private Madrasah Aliyah graduates continue their education to college. The madrasah principal designed a program for developing life skills and entrepreneurship tailored to local potential and economic opportunities in the madrasah's surroundings. The implementation of this innovation was carried out through practical skills training and collaboration with external parties. This vocational strategy

contributed to increasing the independence of graduates and their readiness to participate in the economic life of the community after completing their education.

The results of the study also show that the successful implementation of these three innovation strategies is greatly influenced by the participatory and visionary leadership style of the madrasah principal. The principal involves teachers and educational staff in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of innovation programs. This collective involvement creates a sense of ownership of the madrasah program and strengthens the sustainability of innovation because it does not depend solely on individuals but is embedded in the madrasah's organizational culture.

Overall, the research findings confirm that the innovation strategies of the principals of private Madrasah Aliyah in East Ogan Komering Ulu Regency contribute significantly to the realization of sustainable education. This sustainability is reflected in the continuity of academic quality, the strengthening of religious values, and the readiness of graduates to face social and economic challenges. These findings position madrasah principals as key actors in the development of adaptive and future-oriented Islamic education.

Discussion

This discussion analyzes the innovation strategies of private Madrasah Aliyah principals in realizing sustainable education by linking field findings and theoretical perspectives on educational leadership and Islamic education. This discussion is based on empirical findings at MAS Nurul Huda Sukaraja, MAS Al-Ikhlas Pametung Basuki, and MAS YPI Sumberharjo in East Ogan Komering Ulu Regency, South Sumatra Province. The main focus of the discussion is directed at how leadership innovation not only functions as a response to institutional limitations but also becomes a strategic instrument in maintaining the sustainability of the quality, values, and relevance of madrasahs.

Madrasah Head Innovation Strategies from an Educational Leadership Perspective

Research findings show that the principals of private Madrasah Aliyah schools play an innovative leadership role that goes beyond administrative functions. Principals not only act as managers of the institution, but also as agents of change who actively design and direct educational innovation. This is in line with transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes the role of leaders in building vision, motivating organizational members, and creating sustainable change through collective engagement (Zulfahmi et al., 2025; Bush & Glover, 2019).

In the context of private madrasahs with limited resources, leadership innovation is a strategic necessity. Madrasah principals are required to be able to identify opportunities, manage limitations, and integrate the various internal and external potentials of the institution (Nugraha & Hidayat, 2023; Hallinger, 2018). These findings reinforce the view that the success of educational leadership is not solely determined by the availability of facilities and financial support, but by the leader's ability to manage change in a contextual and adaptive manner.

The innovative leadership found in this study also reflects the principles of participatory leadership. The principal involved teachers and educational staff in the planning and implementation of innovations, so that innovations were not perceived as personal policies, but as shared needs. This pattern strengthened the sustainability of innovation because it was embedded in the organizational culture of the madrasah.

Academic Innovation as a Pillar of Educational Quality Sustainability

Academic innovation is a fundamental strategy in realizing sustainable education in private Islamic high schools. Research findings show that school principals prioritize improving the quality of learning as the foundation for institutional sustainability. Academic innovation is realized through strengthening learning methods, competency-based evaluation, and academic mentoring for students.

Theoretically, this academic innovation is in line with the concept of *continuous improvement* in education, which emphasizes the importance of continuous renewal in the learning process (Ali Mohammad et al., 2025; Sergiovanni, 2021). The principal not only encourages changes in methods, but also builds teachers' awareness to continuously adapt to the needs of students and the demands of the times. This shows that academic innovation is not merely technical in nature, but is rooted in changes in teachers' mindsets and professional culture.

Academic mentoring for final year students also has strategic significance in the context of continuing education. The success of graduates in continuing their studies to a higher level not only enhances the reputation of the madrasah but also strengthens public confidence in the sustainability of the institution (Müller et al., 2022; Fauzi et al., 2024). Thus, academic innovation contributes directly to the sustainability of madrasahs in terms of both graduate quality and institutional existence.

Religious Innovation and the Sustainability of Islamic Educational Values

One of the important findings of this study is the strategic position of religious innovation in the leadership of private Madrasah Aliyah principals. Religious innovation is not merely understood as an increase in ritual activities, but as a systematic effort to internalize Islamic values into the madrasah culture. Madrasah principals integrate religious values into learning, habits, and social relations among madrasah members.

From an Islamic education perspective, this religious innovation reflects the main objective of Islamic education, which is to develop individuals who are faithful, have good character, and are able to carry out their social roles responsibly (Fauzi & Hosna, 2022; Sutino et al., 2021). The sustainability of Islamic education is not only measured by academic achievement, but also by the continuity of values passed on to students and alumni (Pujiyati, 2020; Leithwood et al., 2020).

This finding reinforces the argument that madrasahs have a comparative advantage in strengthening values and character. Religious innovations developed by madrasah principals differentiate madrasahs from other educational institutions and are a source of social legitimacy. Public trust in madrasahs is based not only on academic achievement but also on the belief that madrasahs are capable of continuously shaping the religious character of students.

Vocational Innovation and Expansion of the Meaning of Sustainable Education

The vocational innovations discovered in this study demonstrate the expansion of the meaning of continuing education. Madrasah principals do not limit educational success to academic achievement or further study, but also to the readiness of graduates to face social and economic life. Life skills and entrepreneurship programs are strategic alternatives for students who do not continue their education in college. Theoretically, this vocational innovation is in line with the concept of *life skills education*, which emphasizes the importance of education that is relevant to the real needs of students (Mogaji & Newton, 2020; M. D. R. Sari, 2025). Continuing education in this perspective not only prepares students for academic exams, but also for life. Thus, madrasahs play a role in equipping students with practical skills that can support economic and social independence.

These findings indicate that the head of the Private Madrasah Aliyah is sensitive to the social realities of students and the surrounding environment. Vocational innovation based on local potential strengthens the madrasah's connection with the community, so that educational sustainability cannot be separated from the socio-economic context in which the madrasah is located.

Integration of Academic, Religious, and Vocational Innovation

One of the novel aspects of this study lies in the finding that the innovation strategies of madrasah principals do not work separately but are integrated. Academic, religious, and vocational innovations complement each other and form a sustainable education ecosystem in madrasahs. This integration shows that educational sustainability cannot be achieved through a single approach but through the synergy of various dimensions of education. The head of the madrasah acts as a strategy integrator, ensuring that every innovation supports the madrasah's long-term vision. This integration strengthens the institution's resilience to change and external challenges. These findings expand the study of Islamic educational leadership by placing innovation as a holistic strategy.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of Islamic educational leadership studies by emphasizing the importance of innovation as a key instrument of sustainable education (Friesen et al., 2025; Rachmadio et al., 2024). This research enriches the perspective of leadership with a phenomenological approach that highlights the experiences and actual practices of madrasah principals. In practical terms, the findings of this study provide a reference for madrasah principals and Islamic education administrators in designing contextual and sustainable innovation strategies. Innovation does not have to be based on high technology or large resources, but can be developed through visionary, participatory leadership that is responsive to the needs of the institution and the community.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research objective of analyzing the innovation strategies of private Madrasah Aliyah principals in realizing sustainable education, this study concludes that madrasah principals play a role as innovative leaders who systematically and contextually initiate, direct, and maintain the sustainability of educational change. The results of the study show that the innovation strategies of madrasah principals are realized through the integration of academic, religious, and vocational innovations, which simultaneously contribute to the sustainability of learning quality, the strengthening of religious values and character of students, and the readiness of graduates to face social and economic challenges. The success of these strategies is determined by visionary, participatory, and adaptive leadership, enabling madrasahs to maintain their existence and improve the quality of education despite limited resources. These findings have implications for strengthening the study of Islamic educational leadership by emphasizing the importance of

innovative leadership models that are long-term and sustainable in nature, as well as providing practical recommendations for madrasah principals and Islamic education policy makers to integrate academic, religious, and vocational innovation into a unified leadership vision. However, this study has limitations in terms of the limited scope of the research location and the qualitative approach that emphasizes depth of understanding, thus opening opportunities for further research to expand the context of the study and use more diverse methodological approaches.

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