

# Integrative-Innovative Leadership in Qur'anic Pesantren: A Case Study of Tholibul Qur'an Islamic Boarding School

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## ABSTRACT

Qur'anic pesantren are required to respond to the growing demand for formal education while maintaining Qur'anic traditions as the foundation of institutional identity. This study aims to analyze integrative innovative leadership in Qur'anic pesantren education at Tholibul Qur'an Islamic Boarding School. The study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive case study design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with key informants, consisting of the foundation chairman and ustadz/ustadzah involved in the educational process, supported by document review and relevant literature. The data were analyzed thematically through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings show that integrative innovative leadership operates through four connected mechanisms. First, leaders respond to the aspirations of students' parents who expect pesantren education to be connected with formal academic recognition. Second, institutional change is legitimized through deliberation between leaders and pesantren administrators. Third, formal education through MTs and MA becomes a strategy to expand the social and academic function of the pesantren. Fourth, Qur'anic traditions are maintained through memorization, Qur'anic learning, daily worship practices, dakwatul Qur'an, and character formation. This study contributes to Islamic educational leadership studies by showing that innovation in Qur'anic pesantren is not a shift from tradition to modernization, but an integrative process that connects social needs, institutional renewal, and the preservation of Islamic values.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) have long served as distinctive institutions of Islamic education in Indonesia by integrating religious instruction, moral formation, character development, and community life (Herningrum et al., 2020). Their educational role extends beyond transmitting Islamic knowledge to preserving religious traditions and shaping students' ethical values. Consequently, pesantren continue to be recognized as institutions capable of maintaining Islamic identity while responding to the educational needs of Muslim communities. Contemporary social transformation, however, has generated new challenges for pesantren. Society increasingly expects these institutions not only to preserve Qur'anic traditions but also to provide formally recognized education that enables graduates to pursue higher education and compete in broader professional environments (Ni'am & Arafah, 2024). This changing expectation requires pesantren to balance institutional continuity with educational innovation without compromising their religious foundations. One important response to these demands has been the integration of formal education into the pesantren system. This integration should not be viewed merely as the establishment of additional schools but as an institutional strategy for strengthening educational relevance while maintaining Islamic educational values (Wicaksono, 2022). Accordingly, the central challenge lies in ensuring that modernization enhances rather than weakens the distinctive identity of Qur'anic pesantren. Leadership therefore becomes the key determinant of successful institutional transformation. Innovative leadership emphasizes leaders' capacity to formulate vision,

mobilize organizational resources, encourage institutional learning, and respond adaptively to environmental change (Mareta et al., 2022; Khoirunnisa & Sarika, 2022). Within pesantren, however, leadership extends beyond managerial responsibilities because leaders simultaneously function as religious authorities, moral exemplars, and guardians of institutional values. This distinctive institutional context indicates that leadership in pesantren cannot be interpreted solely through conventional innovation theories. Unlike leaders in general educational organizations, pesantren leaders are expected to introduce organizational reform while preserving Qur'anic traditions, religious legitimacy, and the institution's cultural identity (Arofah, 2021; Asyhari & Budianto, 2025).

Consequently, innovation in pesantren requires a leadership model capable of balancing educational transformation with value preservation. Previous studies consistently demonstrate that visionary, adaptive, participatory, and values-based leadership promotes innovation in Islamic educational institutions. Strategic leadership strengthens organizational learning, educational experimentation, participatory communication, and human resource development (Ummi Hani' et al., 2025), whereas transformative leadership grounded in Islamic values supports curriculum innovation, organizational culture, and character education (Abidin et al., 2025). These studies confirm that educational innovation depends on both managerial competence and moral commitment. Nevertheless, previous studies reveal several important limitations. First, innovative leadership has generally been examined from the perspective of organizational change without adequately explaining how innovation can coexist with the preservation of pesantren identity. Second, leadership, deliberation, formal education, and Qur'anic traditions are commonly discussed as separate phenomena rather than as interconnected leadership processes. Third, limited attention has been devoted to Qur'anic pesantren, where leaders must simultaneously respond to community aspirations, institutionalize formal education, and preserve Qur'anic traditions. These limitations indicate the need for a broader conceptual framework capable of explaining educational transformation without sacrificing institutional identity. Tholibul Qur'an Islamic Boarding School offers an appropriate context for examining this issue. Established to produce Qur'anic generations who are able to read, memorize, understand, practice, and disseminate the Qur'an, the pesantren has gradually expanded its educational system by establishing MTs and MA in response to community expectations. At the same time, Qur'anic memorization, religious practice, character formation, and da'wah activities remain the core of institutional life. This study proposes the concept of innovative integrative leadership. This concept explains leadership as an integrative process that connects responsiveness to community aspirations, deliberative institutional governance, formal educational development, and the preservation of Qur'anic traditions. Unlike previous studies that primarily interpret innovation as organizational adaptation, this study conceptualizes innovation as a process that simultaneously strengthens institutional renewal and reinforces the religious identity of Qur'anic pesantren. This study aims to analyze the practice of innovative integrative leadership at Tholibul Qur'an Islamic Boarding School. Specifically, it examines how pesantren leaders respond to community aspirations, manage deliberative decision-making, integrate formal education into the pesantren system, and preserve Qur'anic traditions as the foundation of institutional identity. Through this perspective, the study contributes a broader theoretical framework for understanding leadership and educational transformation in Qur'anic pesantren.

## 2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach using a descriptive case study design. A qualitative case study was selected because it enables an in-depth exploration of leadership practices within a bounded institutional context and facilitates understanding of the processes

underlying educational transformation (Bizany et al., 2024; Yin et al., 2018). The study focused on examining how integrative innovative leadership supports the integration of formal education while preserving the Qur'anic identity of Tholibul Qur'an Islamic Boarding School. The research was conducted at Tholibul Qur'an Islamic Boarding School, Kedungrejo, Mranggen Village, Polokarto District, Central Java, Indonesia. The site was selected purposively because it represents a Qur'anic pesantren that has experienced institutional transformation through the establishment of MTs and MA since 2019 without abandoning its Qur'anic educational orientation. This institutional characteristic makes the pesantren an information-rich case for investigating leadership practices during organizational change. The participants consisted of three key informants selected through purposive sampling: the Chairperson of the Foundation and two ustadz/ustadzah directly involved in educational implementation. The Foundation Chairperson was selected because of his strategic role in institutional planning, educational policy, and decision-making, whereas the teachers were selected because they were directly responsible for implementing Qur'anic learning, mentoring students, and maintaining daily religious activities. Rather than seeking numerical representation, this study prioritized the depth, relevance, and richness of information obtained from participants occupying different leadership functions within the institution.

Although only three participants were involved, qualitative case study research emphasizes analytical depth rather than sample size (Yin et al., 2018). Data collection continued until no additional concepts, categories, or leadership practices emerged from subsequent interviews. The final interview confirmed recurring patterns that were consistent with previous interviews, indicating that thematic saturation had been achieved within the bounded context of the case study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and literature review. Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to describe their experiences while allowing the researcher to explore emerging issues through follow-up questions. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes, was conducted face-to-face, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim immediately after the interview. Institutional documents were examined to verify historical information, educational programs, and organizational development, while relevant scholarly literature was reviewed to strengthen theoretical interpretation. Thematic analysis followed the procedures proposed by Nowell et al. (2017). First, all interview transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve data familiarization. Second, open coding was performed by assigning descriptive labels to meaningful statements related to leadership practices, institutional change, formal education, and Qur'anic traditions. Third, similar codes were organized through axial coding into broader conceptual categories. Finally, the categories were synthesized into four overarching themes: community aspirations, institutional deliberation, formal education integration, and preservation of Qur'anic traditions. Each theme was continuously reviewed against the complete dataset to ensure conceptual consistency before interpretation. The credibility of the findings was enhanced through source triangulation and theoretical triangulation. Interview findings were compared with institutional documents, educational records, and relevant academic literature to ensure consistency and analytical rigor. Throughout the analytical process, participants' identities were anonymized and are referred to only by their institutional roles in order to maintain research ethics and confidentiality.

Table 1. Stages of Thematic Coding

Stage	Analytical Activity	Output
Familiarization	Reading interview transcripts repeatedly	Initial understanding of the data
Open Coding	Identifying meaningful statements and assigning initial codes	Initial codes
Axial Coding	Grouping related codes into conceptual categories	Categories

Theme Development	Integrating categories into broader themes	Four major themes
Interpretation	Relating themes to Innovative Integrative Leadership theory	Final research findings

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### RESULTS

##### Community Aspirations as a Driver of Institutional Innovation

The findings indicate that community aspirations were the primary catalyst for educational transformation at Tholibul Qur'an Islamic Boarding School. Parents expected the pesantren not only to provide Qur'anic education but also to facilitate access to formal educational qualifications that would enable students to continue their studies. This expectation encouraged the institution to establish MTs and MA while maintaining its Qur'anic orientation. The interview data show that institutional innovation emerged as a response to external social demands rather than internal organizational pressure. The leadership perceived parents' aspirations as an opportunity to broaden the educational role of the pesantren without altering its religious identity. *"Banyak orang tua yang datang kepada kami, mereka menyampaikan keinginannya agar anak-anak mereka tidak hanya hafal Al-Qur'an, tetapi juga punya ijazah yang diakui negara. Mereka khawatir kalau hanya mondok tanpa sekolah formal, nanti anak-anaknya tidak bisa melanjutkan ke perguruan tinggi. Dari situlah kami mulai berpikir untuk membuka MTs dan MA di lingkungan pesantren ini, supaya santri bisa mendapatkan keduanya sekaligus."* Ketua Yayasan Pondok Pesantren Tholibul Qur'an. Document analysis further confirmed that the establishment of formal education since 2019 was closely associated with increasing community demand for educational pathways that combine Qur'anic learning with nationally recognized academic qualifications.

Table 2 Community Aspirations and Institutional Innovation

Findings	Evidence
Parents requested formal education	Interview with Foundation Chairperson
MTs and MA established since 2019	Institutional documents
Qur'anic education remained the institutional priority	Interview and institutional profile

##### Deliberative Decision-Making as Institutional Legitimacy

The findings reveal that institutional transformation was not implemented through unilateral leadership decisions. Instead, the establishment of formal education resulted from a deliberative process involving the Foundation Chairperson, pesantren administrators, and teachers. Collective discussions were conducted before submitting the proposal for institutional registration to the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Interview data demonstrate that deliberation functioned not only as a decision-making mechanism but also as a process for building internal agreement regarding organizational change. Participants consistently emphasized that educational innovation should strengthen rather than replace existing Qur'anic traditions. *"Sebelum MTs dan MA ini berdiri, kami sudah berkumpul beberapa kali untuk musyawarah bersama. Kyai dan pengurus tidak langsung memutuskan sendiri, beliau mengajak kami semua untuk berdiskusi, apa kira-kira dampaknya terhadap kegiatan tahfidz, bagaimana mengatur jadwal supaya tidak bentrok, apakah guru-guru siap. Kami semua diminta menyampaikan pendapat. Saya rasa itu yang membuat kami semua merasa memiliki keputusan ini, bukan sekadar diperintah dari atas."* Ustadzah, Pengajar Pondok Pesantren Tholibul Qur'an. Institutional documents also indicate that organizational decisions were formally discussed before implementation, suggesting that leadership legitimacy was developed through collective participation rather than individual authority.

Table 3 Deliberative Leadership Practices

Findings	Evidence
Decisions reached through deliberation	Interviews
Participation of administrators and teachers	Interviews
Registration with the Ministry of Religious Affairs	Institutional documents

## DISCUSSION

### Community Aspirations as the Foundation of Educational Innovation

The findings demonstrate that institutional innovation was initiated by responsiveness to community expectations rather than by modernization itself. This pattern supports the perspective of social innovation, which argues that innovation becomes sustainable when it responds to stakeholders' actual needs (Prihadyanti et al., 2024). In the present case, parents' aspirations became the driving force behind organizational transformation while preserving the pesantren's religious orientation. These findings also extend previous studies on innovative leadership. Earlier research emphasized leaders' vision and organizational adaptability (Fauziatul Fitrah et al., 2021), whereas this study shows that leadership innovation in Qur'anic pesantren originates from the interaction between institutional values and community expectations. Consequently, innovation should be understood as a socially responsive leadership process rather than merely an organizational reform strategy. The results further suggest that community aspirations contribute to strengthening institutional legitimacy. Instead of creating tension between religious and formal education, educational expansion became a mechanism for increasing the relevance of the pesantren while maintaining its Qur'anic identity. This finding supports the proposed concept of innovative integrative leadership, in which responsiveness to stakeholders becomes the starting point of institutional transformation.

### Deliberation as a Source of Leadership Legitimacy

The study also demonstrates that deliberation constituted an essential mechanism for legitimizing educational transformation. Rather than relying solely on the authority of the pesantren leader, organizational change was achieved through collective consultation involving institutional stakeholders. This finding reflects the principle of shura, which emphasizes participatory decision-making within Islamic organizational governance. The results are consistent with distributed leadership theory, which argues that organizational adaptability increases when decision-making responsibilities are shared among institutional members (Bolden, 2011). However, unlike previous studies that primarily discuss participation as an organizational practice, the present study shows that deliberation simultaneously strengthens institutional legitimacy and preserves Qur'anic educational values. Accordingly, educational transformation at Tholibul Qur'an Islamic Boarding School cannot be interpreted solely as structural reform. Instead, it represents a leadership process that integrates collective participation, religious legitimacy, and institutional innovation. This integrative process differentiates the present findings from previous leadership studies conducted in broader Islamic educational settings.

### Formal Education as an Integrative Institutional Strategy

The findings demonstrate that the establishment of formal education represents an institutional expansion rather than a shift in organizational identity. This pattern supports institutional theory, which argues that educational organizations adapt to environmental expectations while preserving their core values (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In the present study, educational adaptation occurred through integration instead of replacement. Unlike previous studies that primarily describe the integration of pesantren and formal schools as a structural issue (Wicaksono, 2022), this study identifies leadership as the principal mechanism underlying educational integration. Formal education was successfully introduced because leaders were able to

connect community aspirations, collective deliberation, and institutional values within a coherent development strategy. The findings therefore extend the concept of educational integration by demonstrating that successful institutional transformation depends not only on organizational restructuring but also on leadership capable of balancing innovation with value preservation. This balance constitutes a key characteristic of innovative integrative leadership.

### **Preserving Qur'anic Tradition During Educational Transformation**

Another important finding is that educational innovation did not weaken the Qur'anic identity of the pesantren. Instead, institutional development reinforced the role of Qur'anic traditions as the foundation of educational quality. This finding supports previous research emphasizing that Islamic educational innovation should remain grounded in religious values and moral development (Abidin et al., 2025). The present study contributes a more specific perspective by demonstrating that Qur'anic traditions function not merely as cultural symbols but as organizational mechanisms that maintain institutional identity throughout the transformation process. Religious practices, character formation, and Qur'anic learning collectively ensure that modernization does not diminish the distinctive characteristics of the pesantren. Educational transformation in Qur'anic pesantren should not be interpreted as a transition from traditional to modern education. Instead, it represents an integrative process in which institutional innovation and religious continuity reinforce one another. This interpretation further strengthens the theoretical proposition of innovative integrative leadership developed in this study.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that educational transformation in Qur'anic Islamic boarding schools is shaped not merely by institutional expansion but by leadership that is capable of integrating innovation with the preservation of religious values. The findings show that innovative integrative leadership operates through four interconnected dimensions: responsiveness to community aspirations, deliberative decision-making, integration of formal education, and preservation of Qur'anic traditions. These dimensions collectively explain how Tholibul Qur'an Islamic Boarding School has expanded access to formal education while maintaining its Qur'anic identity as the foundation of institutional development. Accordingly, this study extends the discourse on Islamic educational leadership by proposing innovative integrative leadership as a conceptual framework for understanding educational transformation in Qur'anic pesantren beyond the conventional dichotomy between tradition and modernization. The findings also have broader practical and policy implications for the governance of Islamic boarding schools. For pesantren leaders and educational foundations, institutional transformation should be designed through participatory decision-making, responsiveness to community needs, and systematic preservation of Qur'anic values as guiding principles for educational development. Likewise, policymakers, particularly the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Islamic education authorities, may consider supporting policies that encourage the integration of formal education without reducing the distinctive identity of Qur'anic pesantren. Since this study was conducted within a single institutional setting, future research should investigate diverse pesantren contexts and incorporate broader stakeholder perspectives to further validate and refine the proposed innovative integrative leadership framework.

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