

Transformative Leadership in Pesantren Based Vocational Excellence Centers: A Phenomenological Exploration of Principals' Lived Experiences

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ABSTRACT:

This study explores the lived experiences of the principal of SMK Syubbanul Wathon in implementing transformative leadership within a pesantren based Vocational Excellence Center (SMK Pusat Keunggulan Berbasis Pesantren). Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research investigates how pesantren values such as ta'dzim, amanah, ijtihad, and ikhlas are internalized and practiced in leadership that harmonizes spiritual integrity and managerial effectiveness. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, documentation, and observation, and analyzed thematically to reveal the essence of leadership transformation rooted in pesantren ethics. The findings show that the principal functions as both an institutional leader and a moral guide, translating Islamic values into organizational behavior that promotes participation, innovation, and reflective learning. Transformative leadership at SMK Syubbanul Wathon emerges as a moral and structural process where ethical consciousness directs institutional change. The study highlights how faith based morality interacts with professional demands in shaping educational transformation. It contributes to a broader understanding of Islamic educational leadership by integrating spirituality and transformative leadership theory, positioning pesantren based leadership as a model for sustainable, value driven school management in vocational education reform.

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ABSTRAK:

Penelitian ini mengkaji pengalaman hidup kepala sekolah SMK Syubbanul Wathon dalam menerapkan kepemimpinan transformatif pada konteks SMK Pusat Keunggulan berbasis pesantren. Pendekatan fenomenologi kualitatif digunakan untuk menggali bagaimana nilai-nilai pesantren seperti ta'dzim, amanah, ijtihad, dan ikhlas dihayati dan diwujudkan dalam praktik kepemimpinan yang memadukan integritas spiritual dengan efektivitas manajerial. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara mendalam, studi dokumentasi, dan observasi, kemudian dianalisis secara tematik untuk menemukan esensi transformasi kepemimpinan yang berakar pada etika pesantren. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepala sekolah berperan ganda sebagai pemimpin institusi sekaligus pembimbing moral yang menerjemahkan nilai-nilai Islam ke dalam perilaku organisasi yang partisipatif, inovatif, dan reflektif. Kepemimpinan transformatif di SMK Syubbanul Wathon tampak sebagai proses moral dan struktural, di mana kesadaran etis menjadi pengarah utama perubahan institusional. Studi ini menunjukkan bahwa moralitas berbasis iman mampu berdialog secara dinamis dengan tuntutan profesionalisme dalam membentuk transformasi pendidikan. Penelitian ini memperkaya wacana kepemimpinan pendidikan Islam dengan mengintegrasikan spiritualitas dan teori kepemimpinan transformatif, serta menempatkan model kepemimpinan pesantren sebagai paradigma kepemimpinan berkelanjutan yang berorientasi pada nilai dan keunggulan dalam reformasi pendidikan kejuruan.

Kata kunci: Kepemimpinan Transformatif, Pendidikan Berbasis Pesantren, SMK Pusat Keunggulan, Fenomenologi

INTRODUCTION

In the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, global labor markets increasingly demand human resources that are adaptive, innovative, and technologically competent (Mukhlisin et al., 2021; Mydin et al., 2025). Vocational education plays a critical role as the frontline of workforce development that aligns with industrial needs while fostering entrepreneurial and problem-solving capabilities (Roesminingsih & Windasari, 2025). Vocational schools, particularly in developing countries, are positioned to produce graduates equipped with both technical and ethical competencies,



balancing hard skills and soft skills (Fadillah et al., 2020; Tanjung, 2022). Within this framework, leadership in vocational institutions becomes a determining factor in shaping institutional culture and educational quality (Ahmad & Rochimah, 2021; Sinthia et al., 2024). Therefore, strengthening the leadership of Vocational Excellence Center Schools requires a transformational approach capable of managing educational change while building a sustainable learning organization (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Litz & Scott, 2017).

The *SMK Pusat Keunggulan* (SMK PK) program is a strategic initiative by Indonesia's Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology designed to enhance the competitiveness and quality of vocational education through industrial partnerships and innovation (Subandi et al., 2021). This program embodies the principles of *Merdeka Belajar* by positioning SMK PK as model institutions that serve as centers of excellence for other vocational schools nationwide (Adriani & Joeliaty, 2019). Its objectives include digital transformation, industry-linked curricula, and leadership empowerment to improve human resource capacity and institutional governance (Indrawan et al., 2020). Within this framework, leadership becomes not merely administrative but transformative—capable of articulating a shared vision and driving systemic improvement (Mulyadi & Sobri, 2024). Hence, SMK PK represents a contemporary arena for examining how transformational leadership principles are enacted in Indonesia's vocational education reform agenda (Mydin et al., 2025).

The emergence of *Pesantren-Based Vocational Excellence Centers* signifies a unique synthesis between Islamic boarding school traditions and modern vocational systems (Aini et al., 2021; Yusuf et al., 2024). Pesantren values such as *ta'dzim*, *ikhlas*, *amanah*, and *ukhuwah* provide moral and spiritual foundations that shape students' work ethics and social responsibility (Hafidz et al., 2019; Salim et al., 2024). Institutions like SMK Syubbanul Wathon exemplify how pesantren-based education fosters entrepreneurial creativity, technological innovation, and ethical professionalism within a religious framework. This integration not only builds moral capital but also strengthens the resilience and adaptability of students and teachers in facing industrial challenges (Ibrahim et al., 2023). Thus, pesantren-based vocational education provides a fertile context for studying leadership practices that merge spiritual values with transformative educational management (Mariyana et al., 2024).

Transformational leadership emphasizes visionary inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration to foster collective commitment and innovation (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Tanjung et al., 2020). Within education, it supports reflective teaching cultures and organizational learning that drive school improvement and teacher development (Roesminingsih & Windasari, 2025). The model's core components, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, align with Islamic moral leadership principles emphasizing sincerity, justice, and trustworthiness (Javed et al., 2020; Rusydi, 2025). In the pesantren context, transformational leadership extends beyond technical management to encompass spiritual guidance and moral example, positioning the principal as both leader and murabbi (Aini et al., 2021; Yusuf et al., 2024). This theoretical alignment offers a contextualized lens for exploring leadership transformation rooted in faith-based educational ethics and contemporary educational management.

Although numerous studies have explored transformational leadership within Islamic educational settings, most have focused on higher education or madrasah institutions rather than vocational schools (Ghafar et al., 2025; Hadiati et al., 2025). Research in pesantren-based institutions tends to examine leadership charisma or spiritual authority without analyzing the interaction between industrial demands and vocational management (Ilyas & Sibuea, 2019; Salim et al., 2024). Similarly, studies on vocational education leadership often overlook the role of Islamic values as transformative forces that shape ethical and organizational behaviors (Al-Mamary, 2021; Wijayanti et al., 2024). Few have addressed how school principals integrate pesantren culture into leadership practices to balance moral formation and industrial competency within the SMK PK ecosystem (Mydin et al., 2025; Subandi et al., 2021). Consequently, there exists a research gap in understanding the lived experience of principals implementing transformational leadership grounded in pesantren ethos within modern vocational contexts.

This study is significant because it investigates how principals interpret and enact transformational leadership through pesantren-based principles amid complex educational reforms. Pesantren-based SMKs face structural and cultural challenges such as limited resources, inconsistent teacher participation, and the tension between managerial professionalism and spiritual authenticity.



(Mariyana et al., 2024; Tanjung, 2022). Through phenomenological inquiry, this study seeks to reveal how principals' experiences reflect a dialectic between idealism of values and institutional pragmatism. Theoretically, this research contributes to broadening the understanding of Islamic educational leadership by integrating spirituality with transformational leadership theory. Practically, the findings will inform policy and professional development strategies for pesantren-based vocational institutions aiming to enhance leadership quality and school performance (Mulyadi & Sobri, 2024; Mydin et al., 2025).

The novelty of this study lies in its phenomenological approach, which conceptualizes pesantren-based transformational leadership as a lived moral experience rather than a prescriptive managerial model. By combining the dimensions of transformational leadership with pesantren ethos—*ta'dzim*, *ikhlas*, and *amanah*—this research offers a new paradigm for leadership in Islamic vocational education (Hafidz et al., 2019; Subandi et al., 2021). It proposes a conceptual model that bridges the gap between spiritual leadership traditions and evidence-based educational management. The findings are expected to enrich the global discourse on faith-driven educational leadership by positioning pesantren as a model for sustainable, ethical, and innovative school management. Accordingly, this study establishes a scholarly nexus linking modern leadership theory with Indonesia's unique pesantren-based vocational education system.

METHODS

The method used in this research is a qualitative phenomenological approach. This approach focuses on exploring and understanding the lived experiences of participants in relation to a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2017). The study aims to reveal the subjective meanings of transformational leadership practiced by principals in *Islamic Boarding School-Based Vocational High Schools* (*SMK Pusat Keunggulan Berbasis Pesantren*). The phenomenological method allows the researcher to capture the essence of leadership experiences rooted in pesantren values. Through this design, the study seeks to interpret how principals internalize religious, moral, and transformative values in managing pesantren-based vocational schools.

The participants in this study are school principals who have implemented transformational leadership within pesantren-based vocational

institutions. The selection of participants uses a purposive sampling technique to ensure relevance to the research objectives. Each participant plays a central role in shaping school policies, managing learning environments, and promoting the integration of pesantren culture into school leadership. Supporting data were also collected from institutional documents, such as the school's vision and mission statements, annual reports, and leadership programs. This combination of participant and documentary data ensures that the phenomenon is studied comprehensively and contextually.

The data collection process employed in-depth interviews, documentation, and participatory observation (Creswell, 2017). In-depth interviews were conducted using semi-structured questions to allow flexibility in exploring the participants' perspectives. The interviews focused on the principals' (KS) reflections on leadership challenges, values, and strategies related to pesantren-based transformation. Documentation was used to obtain data from official records, including policies, activity reports, and administrative documents. Observation was conducted to provide contextual understanding of leadership practices and interactions that occur naturally in the school setting.

The data analysis procedure follows the qualitative analytical model developed in educational research methodology (Cohen et al., 2018). This model includes several systematic stages such as data reduction, coding, categorization, and thematic interpretation. All data obtained from interviews, documents, and observations were transcribed verbatim before being organized for analysis. The process of thematic coding was conducted to classify data into meaningful categories based on conceptual patterns and relationships among themes. The analysis focuses on discovering the essence of the lived experiences, illustrating how pesantren-based values are integrated and manifested in the transformational leadership practices of school principals.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study employs source triangulation and member checking (Cohen et al., 2018). Triangulation is achieved by comparing data obtained from different sources and methods to verify consistency. Member checking is used to confirm that the interpretations accurately represent the participants' intended meanings. Ethical considerations are strictly maintained by obtaining informed consent and ensuring the confidentiality of participant identities. All collected data are



used solely for academic purposes and handled according to research ethics standards. This methodological framework provides a valid and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of transformational leadership in pesantren-based vocational schools.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

This study analyzes the experiences of the principal in implementing transformative leadership based on the pesantren model at a Vocational Excellence Center School. The focus lies on understanding the challenges, opportunities, and dynamics in managing pesantren-based education. The analysis highlights how pesantren values are integrated into school leadership and management. This section presents the findings derived from that analytical focus.

Leadership Management at the Vocational Excellence Center School (SMK) Based on the Pesantren System

The leadership of the principal at the Vocational Excellence Center School based on the pesantren model demonstrates a dynamic and reflective character in managing change. The transformative approach applied is not merely an effort to create innovation but also a strategy to cultivate the adaptive capacity of the entire school community in responding to the evolving demands of vocational education within the pesantren context. The principal views innovation as part of a moral responsibility rather than a mere administrative task, urging teachers and staff to think creatively while upholding the religious values that form the school's identity. In this context, transformative leadership emerges as a process continuously negotiated between the idealism of vision and the operational realities of the school. As expressed by the principal,

"Transformative leadership fosters an innovative and creative environment of thought, enabling the school to continuously adapt and improve the quality of education." (KS)

The principal emphasized that a transformative approach requires active participation from all members of the school. However, in practice, such participation has not been fully realized. Some teachers felt that

school policies remain top-down in nature, particularly in strategic decision-making. This perception reflects a gap between the intention to build collaboration and the persistence of bureaucratic tendencies within the school's structure. The principal also acknowledged this dilemma, recognizing that not all teachers feel they have equal opportunities to participate. This statement indicates a reflective awareness of the limitations of the leadership model, which aspires to transform the educational organization's culture without losing its normative direction.

"We encourage teachers and staff to participate in decision-making and program development, but not all feel equally involved or given the same opportunities." (KS)

Transformative leadership at this school also seeks to balance managerial functions and the inspirational role of the principal as a moral motivator. One manifestation of this balance is the division of roles among mentoring teachers, supervising teachers, and industry collaboration coordinators (CO-Dudi), each entrusted with responsibilities to support students' learning and industrial internship activities. This structure is not merely administrative but reflects a leadership strategy aimed at fostering collective responsibility. Although this division of roles provides clearer direction for supervision and student guidance mechanisms, its implementation still faces coordination challenges among different institutional actors. This complexity indicates that transformative leadership is not merely about vision but rather a social learning process that continues to evolve.

The implementation of the school's vision emphasizing academic and moral excellence demonstrates that transformative leadership at the school does not remain at the level of rhetoric. However, in practice, a gap exists between the formulation of vision and its realization on the ground. The principal acknowledged that limited human resources and communication barriers influence the effectiveness of program implementation. The school's vision to produce competitive and morally upright graduates requires integration between spiritual values and vocational skills, which is not easily achieved without structural readiness and a supportive work culture. In this context, the principal's



leadership moves reflectively between the need for transformation and awareness of systemic constraints.

“We have a clear vision to enhance educational quality and develop students’ competencies, but we are also aware that its implementation does not always run smoothly.” (KS)

Findings from interviews and documentation reveal that the principal strives to strengthen the internal system by optimizing the roles of mentoring and supervising teachers. Mentoring teachers, for instance, ensure student discipline and project continuity, while supervising teachers assist with problem-solving and verifying student activity reports. Routine coordination, including monthly discussions with CO-Dudi, reflects the implementation of collaboration-based leadership. However, the dynamics of interpersonal relations show that successful coordination heavily depends on the principal’s ability to build trust and team motivation. At this point, transformative leadership takes its practical form as a social process involving negotiation of meaning, responsibility, and shared expectations.

Transformative leadership at the Vocational Excellence Center School based on the pesantren system reveals a dialogical character between religious idealism and institutional efficiency demands. The principal attempts to transform the institution through moral approaches while remaining result-oriented in improving educational quality. Reflections from the research indicate that such a leadership style is inherently contestative as it operates between the drive to inspire and the necessity to manage. The principal acts not only as a manager but also as a mediator of values and direction for change. Thus, leadership at this school cannot be understood merely as an administrative strategy but as a reflective space where values, culture, and organizational structures interact to shape sustainable educational transformation.

The empirical reflection and meaning of leadership are summarized in Table 1 below, which illustrates the leadership process as a dialogical arena among values, structure, and educational transformation practices at the Vocational Excellence Center School based on the pesantren model.

Table 1. Empirical Reflection and Meaning of Transformative Leadership at the Vocational Excellence Center School Based on the Pesantren Model

Leadership Focus	Empirical Meaning and Reflection in the Context of School Transformation
Leadership Orientation	The principal implements a transformative leadership model emphasizing innovation, creativity, and adaptability in school management. This approach promotes organizational culture change toward openness to ideas and renewal.
Teacher Participation and Involvement	The principal encourages the participation of teachers and staff in decision-making, yet some feel they have not received equal opportunities for involvement.
Policy Implementation Consistency	The transformative approach faces challenges in maintaining consistency due to limited system support and human resources.
Collaborative Management	The principal establishes a collaborative work system among mentoring teachers, supervising teachers, and CO-Dudi to ensure the integration of learning and industrial practice activities.
Relationship between Vision and Operational Reality	The principal possesses a clear vision of student quality and competitiveness, but implementation is hindered by limited resources and communication barriers.
Adaptive Culture and Organizational Learning	Leadership is directed toward building an organizational culture capable of learning from processes rather than merely from outcomes. Every teacher is encouraged to become a small

agent of change within their area of responsibility.

Overall, the leadership management at the Vocational Excellence Center School based on the pesantren model demonstrates a transition toward a learning organization model. The principal performs a reflective leadership function by building vision, fostering participation, and structuring collaboration while remaining realistic about systemic limitations. This pattern signifies leadership that moves between two dimensions: ideal transformation and practical adaptation, where the moral values of pesantren serve as an ethical foundation and managerial efficiency as a strategic necessity.

Transformative Leadership Based on the Pesantren Model

Transformative leadership at the Vocational Excellence Center School based on the pesantren model exhibits a distinctive character rooted in pesantren values as the ethical and moral framework guiding leadership practices. The principal functions not only as an institutional manager but also as a moral figure who internalizes Islamic teachings into daily leadership practices. Values such as respect for teachers (*ta'dzim*), sincerity in teaching, and spiritual discipline form the foundation for shaping the school's culture. This approach shows that educational transformation occurs not only at the managerial level but also within the dimension of collective moral awareness. The principal emphasized that pesantren values serve as the spiritual essence that safeguards the direction of change so that it does not lose its ethical dimension amid modern professional demands.

“The leadership of pesantren instills respect for teachers as part of the Islamic religious culture. Transformative leadership based on pesantren aims to encourage change and improve the quality of education.” (KS)

In this context, transformative leadership based on pesantren serves as a bridge between spiritual values and managerial rationality. The principal strives to instill awareness that organizational change cannot rely solely on structural policies but must also be accompanied by mental and moral transformation among all actors involved. This is

evident from the reflective habits cultivated through character-building activities such as regular religious talks (*tausyiah*), collective prayers before learning activities, and the reinforcement of Islamic work ethics during staff meetings. These practices are not merely symbolic forms of religiosity but represent a leadership strategy that binds the school community through shared moral commitment. Spiritual awareness functions here as a social mechanism that fosters a collective sense of responsibility toward educational quality.

The integration of pesantren values and modern leadership is also reflected in the principal's efforts to develop teachers' competencies without detaching from the moral foundation of Islam. Teacher training programs are designed not only to enhance pedagogical skills but also to strengthen ethics and exemplary behavior in interactions with students. Documentation data show that activities such as *In-Service Learning* and *Competency Test Workshops* always begin with reflections on Islamic values and spiritual motivation.

Figure 1. Teacher Workshop on Developing Competency Test Materials at SMK Syubbanul



This pattern demonstrates that professional training in pesantren-based schools is understood not merely as a process of skill mastery but as an intellectual form of worship oriented toward the common good. Therefore, the principal's leadership does not stand between two opposing poles—religion and professionalism—but integrates them into a transformative vision grounded in moral values.

“The application of these values requires reinforcement through more structured training for both teachers and students.” (KS)

Transformative leadership based on pesantren also plays a vital role in shaping the work ethos of teachers and students. The principal consciously employs pesantren values such as trustworthiness (*amanah*) and sincerity (*ikhlas*) as instruments to cultivate intrinsic motivation in both teaching and learning. Interviews with students reveal that they interpret discipline and independence not as administrative enforcement but as expressions of moral responsibility. This indicates the successful transformation of values into educational practice. The religious attitudes nurtured within the school are not confined to rituals but manifest in consistent learning and working ethics.

“I am very grateful to study here. The school environment is very supportive, moral values are well maintained, and most importantly, I have become more independent and confident.” (S-01)

The strength of pesantren-based leadership in this school also lies in its ability to maintain a balance between spirituality and productivity. The principal strives to uphold the values of *ukhuwah* (brotherhood) and collective responsibility in every development program. Activities such as the *Sharia Literacy Forum* serve as spaces where religious values are practiced within dynamic social contexts. Through such activities, leadership is no longer expressed through directives but through exemplary conduct that inspires the community. This illustrates that the strength of transformative leadership based on pesantren does not stem from formal authority but from moral authority that grows through trust and consistency in the leader's behavior.

From the overall reflection, transformative leadership based on the pesantren model at the Vocational Excellence Center School reveals efforts to contextualize Islamic values within modern educational management. Spiritual values are not treated as moral ornaments but as epistemological principles guiding the school's direction of transformation. The principal seeks to balance religious idealism and institutional efficiency through dialogue and example. This pattern forms a leadership paradigm that transforms not only systems but also collective awareness about the meaning of education as a process of *tazkiyah* (self-purification) and social empowerment. Hence, pesantren-based leadership in this school reflects the convergence of spirituality and rationality that mutually reinforce one another in the practice of educational transformation.

Optimization of the Vocational Excellence Center School Based on the Pesantren Model

The optimization of the Vocational Excellence Center School based on the pesantren model takes place within an integrative framework that combines academic quality enhancement, vocational skills development, and the cultivation of religious values. The principal directs the school's transformation not merely toward managerial improvement or the reinforcement of Islamic principles but also toward strengthening the institution's capacity to meet the demands of the workforce and industry. The central focus lies in bridging two dimensions that often seem contradictory: spirituality and productivity. According to the principal, maintaining balance between these two aspects is crucial to ensure that graduates are not only morally upright but also professionally competent. This transformation requires leadership that is both inspirational and strategic in managing resources and building external partnerships.

“Through the pesantren-based Vocational Excellence Center, we hope to integrate religious and academic values in education. The greatest challenge lies in how to measure and sustain the balance between these two aspects.” (KS)

The principal believes that institutional optimization cannot be achieved without synergy among the school, the business and industrial



sectors (DUDI), and the pesantren community. Partnerships, therefore, become a strategic arena for transformative leadership aimed at producing tangible results. Collaboration with DUDI is not limited to graduate recruitment but also involves curriculum alignment, competency test development, and professional certification programs such as the MikroTik Academy. This approach reflects an awareness that the relevance of vocational education cannot be maintained solely through internal innovation but must remain connected to the continuously evolving economic and industrial systems. However, the principal also acknowledged that industrial partners' readiness varies, making it necessary to deepen collaboration to ensure that it genuinely contributes to improving educational quality.

“Partnerships with the business and industrial sectors are crucial, but it is essential to ensure that the opportunities created truly enhance the quality of education and expand employment prospects for students.” (KS)

Documentation data show that the school's internal support structure is also designed to strengthen students' readiness for the workforce. The division of roles among mentoring teachers, supervising teachers, and CO-Dudi aims to create a realistic learning ecosystem oriented toward industrial experience. Mentoring teachers ensure discipline and order, while CO-Dudi serves as a bridge between vocational learning and field practice. This collaborative model demonstrates how transformative leadership operates at a systemic level rather than merely at the individual level. However, this practice still requires stronger consolidation and supervision to prevent it from degenerating into administrative routines that hinder the school's innovative goals.

Optimization is also evident in the school's efforts to design programs that foster students' independence and character. Activities such as *Outbound Kebersamaan* (Team-Building Outbound), *National Santri Day*, and participation in the *Jogja Fashion Week 2025* serve as integrative learning platforms that connect technical skills with social values

Figure 2. Three Students Participating in Jogja Fashion Week 2025



These programs extend students' learning experiences beyond the classroom, creating contextual and experiential learning spaces. The principal uses such activities as vehicles to instill work ethics, social responsibility, and self-confidence. This strategy shows that institutional optimization is not measured solely through academic outputs but also through the formation of students' adaptive capacities for broader social and professional life.

Furthermore, documentation findings indicate that the school's vision and mission emphasize global competitiveness, entrepreneurship, and independence grounded in Islamic values. This vision is translated into curricula and activities that nurture innovation and a sense of national identity. Workshops on developing competency test materials and collaboration with the National Professional Certification Board (BNSP) assessors demonstrate the school's commitment to establishing a credible certification system for students. However, the optimization process is not yet ideal, as it still depends on the internal capacity of human resources and the strength of limited partnership networks. This reality highlights that transformative leadership at the pesantren-based vocational school level is measured not only by the degree to which Islamic values are internalized but also by how effectively the institution manages a competitive educational ecosystem.

Reflections from the overall findings reveal that the optimization of the Vocational Excellence Center School based on the pesantren model is not merely the result of administrative policy or religious morality but rather the product of a dialectical process between the two. The principal acts as a mediator who reinterprets the meaning of "excellence" not only in terms of academic achievement but also in social and spiritual dimensions. The transformation that occurs is gradual, depending on the institution's ability to negotiate pesantren values with the economic realities of the industrial world. Thus, the optimization of pesantren-based vocational schools reflects an educational model that strives to remain rooted in Islamic tradition while responding to modernity in a critical and adaptive manner.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the principal's leadership experience embodies a reflective dialogue between pesantren ethics and modern managerial demands. This synthesis is not merely a coexistence of traditional and professional values but a negotiated process of moral reasoning that shapes the nature of educational transformation. The principal's approach operationalizes pesantren values such as *ta'dzim*, *amanah*, and *ikhlas* as moral filters that guide strategic decision-making (Aini et al., 2021; Yusuf et al., 2024). In this way, transformative leadership functions both as an administrative instrument and as an ethical compass ensuring that reform remains spiritually legitimate (Salim et al., 2024). Hence, the essence of leadership transformation in pesantren-based vocational schools lies in the capacity to translate moral consciousness into practical management while maintaining institutional authenticity.

This study supports earlier evidence showing that transformational leadership improves organizational citizenship behavior and job satisfaction among educators (Mulyadi & Sobri, 2024; Tanjung et al., 2020). However, the results reveal that in pesantren-based schools, transformation is not defined by hierarchical influence but by shared moral dialogue between leaders and followers. Prior studies described leadership impact primarily through managerial efficiency or teacher motivation (Litz & Scott, 2017; Rusydi, 2025), whereas this study identifies moral intention and ethical coherence as the underlying mechanisms sustaining institutional resilience. Leadership

effectiveness emerges when the spiritual ethos of pesantren becomes an intrinsic motivator that aligns personal commitment and collective purpose (Adriani & Joeliaty, 2019; Aziz et al., 2022). Therefore, the findings expand the understanding of transformational leadership beyond the psychological to encompass an ethical-cultural dimension that redefines professional performance as moral devotion.

This research critically reinterprets Bass and Avolio's framework within an Islamic moral epistemology (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Rather than applying the four dimensions mechanically, this study contextualizes them as ethical experiences embedded in pesantren culture. Idealized influence corresponds to ta'dzim, where authority is derived from respect and humility rather than personal charisma (Subandi et al., 2021). Inspirational motivation manifests as amanah, positioning leadership as a trust that connects moral integrity with institutional vision (Aini et al., 2021). Intellectual stimulation translates to ijтиhad, emphasizing reflective reasoning and contextual problem-solving, while individualized consideration reflects ikhlas, symbolizing sincerity in developing others. Through this redefinition, leadership effectiveness is seen not as behavioral compliance but as the internalization of virtue that enables sustainable educational transformation (Yusuf et al., 2024). The reinterpretation thus extends Bass and Avolio's model by embedding it in an ethical framework that integrates faith-based consciousness with organizational learning.

The practical implications of these findings are substantial for leadership formation in Islamic vocational schools. Leadership training programs should emphasize spiritual reflection and ethical reasoning to enhance empathy, accountability, and participative decision-making (Hadiati et al., 2025). The incorporation of pesantren values in management practice fosters both professional competence and communal harmony, strengthening the moral identity of the institution (Adriani & Joeliaty, 2019). Teachers, staff, and students benefit from leadership that models moral consistency, where integrity and innovation coexist as guiding principles for continuous improvement (Roesminingsih & Windasari, 2025). Thus, institutional transformation in pesantren-based education depends on leadership that integrates administrative capability with spiritual authenticity, forming an ecosystem of reflective professionalism.



Despite the positive outcomes, the implementation of pesantren-based transformative leadership faces several contextual challenges. Limited resources, communication barriers, and uneven teacher participation often hinder the development of truly collaborative governance (Ibrahim et al., 2023). The persistence of hierarchical and bureaucratic tendencies contradicts the ideal of shared leadership envisioned within the pesantren ethos (Mulyadi & Sobri, 2024). Moreover, the tension between managerial professionalism and religious sincerity demands leaders to engage in continuous self-evaluation to prevent moral complacency (Hafidz et al., 2019). To address these issues, leadership in pesantren-based schools must evolve toward a dialogical model that promotes transparency, distributed responsibility, and reflective learning. Such a model encourages ethical adaptability and sustains organizational trust as the foundation of institutional growth.

The conceptual model derived from this study proposes a synthesis called *Transformative Leadership in Pesantren-based Vocational Education*. Each core component of transformational leadership is reinterpreted through pesantren virtues: *ta'dzim* represents moral authority grounded in humility; *amanah* embodies integrity and responsibility; *ijtihad* symbolizes critical and contextual thinking; and *ikhlas* expresses sincerity in guiding and empowering others (Aini et al., 2021; Subandi et al., 2021). These dimensions interact to form a moral-structural ecosystem in which leadership is a process of continuous ethical learning rather than instrumental control (Roesminingsih & Windasari, 2025). The model illustrates that successful educational transformation emerges from the harmony between value internalization and organizational adaptability (Adriani & Joeliaty, 2019). Leadership in this sense becomes both an epistemic and moral act that redefines quality assurance through ethical consistency, not merely through performance indicators. The integration of moral values and managerial competence provides a new paradigm for sustainable educational reform within pesantren-oriented institutions.

The findings provide direction for educational policymakers and practitioners seeking to institutionalize transformative leadership within pesantren-based schools. Leadership certification and professional development should include modules on reflective spirituality, moral leadership, and ethical decision-making. Collaboration among pesantren, vocational schools, and industry partners is necessary to ensure that vocational

excellence aligns with both moral and professional outcomes. Future research could expand this model through comparative studies across regions to identify how local culture mediates the integration of religious and managerial values. Moreover, attention should be given to gender and digital transformation dimensions, which have been shown to shape leadership inclusivity and responsiveness in Islamic education contexts. Such exploration will advance a holistic understanding of pesantren-based leadership as a strategic and ethical foundation for global educational quality assurance.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that transformative leadership within pesantren-based Vocational Excellence Centers represents a reflective synthesis between spiritual ethics and modern managerial rationality. Leadership in this context transcends administrative functions and becomes a moral endeavor rooted in collective consciousness and ethical awareness. The principles of *ta'dzim* (respect), *amanah* (trustworthiness), *ijtihad* (critical reasoning), and *ikhlas* (sincerity) guide the principal's actions, shaping leadership as both a spiritual calling and an organizational responsibility. Transformation thus unfolds not only as structural or procedural innovation but as an ongoing moral dialogue that binds the school community through shared values and a sense of purpose. This dynamic interplay between faith and professionalism illustrates that true educational transformation in pesantren-based schools emerges when moral conviction becomes the foundation of institutional creativity and resilience.

This research contributes to the broader discourse on Islamic educational leadership by positioning pesantren values as an epistemic and ethical framework for modern school governance. The study demonstrates how spirituality can coexist with managerial effectiveness, offering a model of leadership that is both humane and strategic. Nevertheless, the findings are drawn from a limited number of cases, which may not capture the full diversity of pesantren-based vocational institutions across different regions. Future research should therefore explore comparative and cross-cultural analyses to deepen understanding of how local traditions shape leadership identity and practice. Leadership development programs in Islamic education would benefit from integrating reflective spirituality, ethical reasoning, and collaborative management as core competencies. Strengthening partnerships among



pesantren, schools, and industry can ensure that vocational excellence remains anchored in moral integrity while advancing global competitiveness.

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