



Transforming the Quality of Tahfidz and Religious Programs Through Relational Leadership of Madrasah Principals

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the implementation of relational leadership in improving the quality of tahfidz and religious programs in Islamic elementary schools. The research employs a qualitative case study approach to explore leadership practices, collaborative commitment building, and the transformation of program quality. Data were collected through interviews, observation, and documentation involving principals, teachers, and program supervisors, and analyzed using data condensation, data display, and verification techniques. The findings show that relational leadership is implemented through open communication, role modeling, and collaborative decision-making, which strengthens trust and engagement among school members. Shared commitment to program quality is built through teacher involvement in planning, implementation, and evaluation processes. The study also reveals that relational leadership contributes to improved student discipline, increased memorization achievement, and stronger motivation in religious learning activities. The implication of this study is that relational leadership serves as a key driver in transforming educational quality by fostering collaboration, trust, and sustainable commitment within the school environment, particularly in strengthening tahfidz and religious education programs.

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INTRODUCTION

Improving the quality of education is a strategic issue of global concern because it is directly related to the quality of human resources and the competitiveness of a nation (Ponomarenko et al., 2022; Pramana et al., 2021). In the context of modern society, educational institutions function not only as a place to transfer knowledge, but also as a space for the formation of character, values, and sustainable social competence (Kjellgren & Richter, 2021; Moscardini et al., 2022). Quality education is a prerequisite for creating a society that is adaptive to social, technological, and economic changes. Various international reports, such as UNESCO, emphasize that the quality of school leadership is one of the main determinants of the success of the education system (Özdemir et al., 2024; White et al., 2025). In this regard, the principal or head of the madrasah holds a central position in directing the vision, organizational culture, and learning effectiveness. Therefore, the issue of educational quality cannot be separated from the quality of leadership that is able to build collaboration and collective commitment in the educational environment.

Although various policies to improve the quality of education have been implemented, many educational institutions still face challenges in ensuring consistent quality of learning processes and character-building programs (Cholifah, 2024; Iksal et al., 2024). The main problem that arises is the suboptimal synergy between educational stakeholders, including madrasah principals, teachers, mentors, and students. In the context of Islamic education, tahfidz programs and religious activities often do not run sustainably due to differing perceptions regarding achievement standards, weak coordination, and low collective involvement (Handrianto et al., 2025; Rekan & Mokhtar, 2025). Furthermore, an overly administrative managerial approach results in a lack of attention to the relational aspects of leadership. As a result, program implementation does not always reflect the expected culture of quality (Endalamaw et al., 2024; Redman-MacLaren et al., 2021). This condition indicates a gap between the ideal goals of religious character-based education and management practices in the field, necessitating a more adaptive and socially relational leadership approach.

The phenomena in various madrasas indicate that the implementation of the tahfidz program and religious activities has had varying degrees of success. In some madrasas, the program has been effective, with stable memorization achievements and high student participation (Chen, 2025; Pilotti et al., 2022). However, in other madrasas, obstacles were found, such as low consistency in memorization contributions, lack of student motivation, and unstructured coordination between teachers and supervisors. Initial observations also indicated that communication between the madrasah principal and teaching staff was often top-down, limiting space for dialogue and collective reflection. On the other hand, madrasas that successfully improved the quality of their programs generally had more participatory leadership patterns, in which the principal actively built strong interpersonal relationships. This indicates that the quality of social interaction within educational organizations plays a crucial role in determining the success of the ongoing implementation of religious and tahfidz programs.

A literature review shows that educational leadership has been extensively researched from various perspectives, particularly transformational and instructional leadership (Bellibaş et al., 2021; Shava & Heystek, 2021). These studies generally

emphasize the principal's role in enhancing teacher motivation, learning effectiveness, and educational organizational performance. The results of various studies indicate that transformational leadership can increase teacher commitment by inspiring vision and strengthening intrinsic motivation (Kareem et al., 2023; Setyaningsih & Sunaryo, 2021). Furthermore, instructional leadership focuses on overseeing the learning process and improving academic quality. However, both approaches tend to position leadership as an individual process centered on the formal leader (Eva et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2021). As a result, aspects of social relations and horizontal interactions between organizational members have received insufficient attention. This limitation suggests that there is still room to develop a leadership perspective that places greater emphasis on social relations as the basis for establishing the effectiveness of educational organizations.

In the development of recent leadership theories, relational leadership has begun to gain attention as an alternative approach that emphasizes the importance of relationships, communication, and collaboration within organizations (Jian, 2022; McCauley & Palus, 2021). Uhl-Bien (2006) explains that leadership is not only understood as an individual attribute, but as a social process formed through interactions between actors (Ribbat et al., 2024; Soela et al., 2024). Several studies have shown that relational leadership can increase organizational trust, strengthen member engagement, and create a collaborative work culture (Leclerc et al., 2022; Mataboge, 2025). The implementation of this concept in the context of Islamic education, particularly in the management of tahfidz programs and religious activities in madrasas, is still very limited. Most studies focus more on business organizations or general institutions, rather than on educational institutions based on religious values (Abbas et al., 2024; Anggadwita et al., 2021). This indicates an empirical and conceptual gap that needs to be addressed through more contextual and specific research on madrasas.

This research offers novelty by integrating the concept of relational leadership in the context of quality assurance for tahfidz (Quran recitation) and religious programs in madrasas. Unlike previous studies that emphasized structural aspects or individual performance, this research focuses on the relational dimension, encompassing communication, trust, collaboration, and collective involvement of all madrasa members. This approach allows for a more comprehensive analysis of how social interactions shape shared commitment to implementing religious programs. Furthermore, this research positions the madrasah principal not only as an administrative leader but also as a relational actor who builds a quality culture ecosystem. Thus, this research contributes to the development of a more contextual theory of Islamic educational leadership and offers a new analytical model for understanding social relationship-based quality transformation in madrasa environments.

Based on theoretical descriptions and empirical phenomena, the research problem formulation in this study is how madrasah principals implement relational leadership in building a shared commitment to quality assurance of tahfidz and religious programs. This study argues that the effective implementation of relational leadership will strengthen the involvement of all madrasah members in the planning, implementation, and evaluation processes of the program. Through relationships built on open communication, trust, and collaboration, various obstacles such as low

commitment, differences in perception, and weak coordination can be minimized. This condition ultimately encourages the formation of a sustainable quality culture in tahfidz programs and religious activities. Thus, relational leadership is positioned as a key factor that influences not only managerial effectiveness but also the overall transformation of the culture of Islamic educational organizations.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design (Fahmi, 2024; Takona, 2024). This approach was chosen because it aims to understand in-depth the phenomenon of relational leadership implementation by madrasah principals in building a shared commitment to quality assurance of tahfidz and religious programs. Case studies are used because the research focuses on one specific case that occurred in a real context, thus allowing intensive exploration of the processes, interactions, and social dynamics that occur within it. This approach is relevant for exploring the meaning, perceptions, and practices of leadership that cannot be measured quantitatively. Thus, this design provides space for researchers to understand holistically how social relationships, communication, and collaboration are built within the madrasah environment as a basis for improving the quality of religious programs.

This research was conducted at MINU Sunan Ampel 1 Wonorejo Maron Probolinggo. The location was chosen based on the consideration that the madrasa has an active tahfidz program and religious activities that involve various elements of the madrasa community in their implementation. Furthermore, this madrasa exhibits interesting leadership dynamics to study, particularly in terms of the involvement of the madrasa principal in building working relationships and shared commitment. These conditions make this location relevant for analyzing the implementation of relational leadership in the context of Islamic education. Data collection techniques were carried out through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observations were used to directly observe leadership activities and program implementation, interviews to explore informants' experiences, and documentation to strengthen and verify field data.

Data analysis in this study was conducted interactively, referring to the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model. The analysis process begins with data condensation, which is the process of selecting, focusing, and simplifying data obtained from observations, interviews, and documentation to align with the research focus (Okoko et al., 2023; Salmona & Kaczynski, 2024). The next stage is data presentation, which is arranging the data in narrative, tabular, or matrix form to facilitate the identification of patterns and relationships between findings. Next, conclusions are drawn and verification, which is the process of interpreting the meaning of the data while rechecking the consistency of findings in the field. These stages are carried out repeatedly and interactively to produce a deep and systematic understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

To ensure data validity, this study employed source and technical triangulation techniques. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from the madrasah principal, teachers, tahfidz instructors, and students to ensure data consistency. Meanwhile, technical triangulation was conducted by comparing the results of observations, interviews, and documentation to obtain more valid and

credible data. Furthermore, the researcher double-checked the interpretation results through repeated verification processes during data collection and analysis. This effort aims to ensure that the research findings truly reflect the actual conditions in the field. Thus, the validity, reliability, and credibility of the research results can be scientifically maintained in accordance with qualitative case study research standards.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Implementation of Relational Leadership by the Principal of Madrasah

Research findings from interviews with teachers indicate that the principal implements relational leadership by emphasizing open and ongoing interpersonal communication. Teachers stated that the principal not only acts as a formal decision-maker but also actively listens to aspirations, challenges, and needs in implementing the tahfidz program and religious activities. This communication pattern makes teachers feel more valued in their work processes. Furthermore, communication occurs not only in formal forums such as meetings but also through informal interactions in daily activities. This indicates that working relationships are built naturally and based on trust.

Based on observations, the madrasah principal actively participates in religious activities such as Quran recitation, congregational prayers, and student guidance. This presence demonstrates exemplary behavior that strengthens the emotional bond between the madrasah principal, teachers, and students. The interactions that occur demonstrate a more open and participatory atmosphere within the madrasah. Teachers and students appear more comfortable communicating, particularly during the learning process and religious activities.

Furthermore, a collaborative leadership style is evident in the decision-making process related to the tahfidz program and madrasah activities. Teachers and students are involved in discussions on program planning, implementation, and evaluation. This demonstrates that decisions are not one-way, but take into account input from various parties directly involved in the program.

Table 1. Implementation of Relational Leadership by the Principal of Madrasah

Relational Leadership Dimensions	Implementation Form	Data source
Interpersonal communication	Formal and informal dialogue with teachers and students	Interview & observation
Exemplary behavior	Attendance at religious activities (tadarus, congregational prayers)	Observation
Collaboration	Involvement of teachers and students in decision making	Interview & observation
Strengthening coordination	Regular evaluation and meetings of the tahfidz program	Documentation

Table 1 shows that the implementation of relational leadership in madrasahs is not merely conceptual but has been realized in concrete practices that include communication, role modeling, and collaboration. Interview and observation data confirm that madrasah principals build strong relationships through direct interactions in both formal and informal activities. Meanwhile, documentation reinforces the existence of a structured coordination system through regular meetings and

evaluations. This demonstrates that relational leadership operates in an integrated manner, integrating social and structural aspects.

Building a Shared Commitment to Program Quality

Interviews with teachers and tahfidz instructors indicate that shared commitment to the program was built through their active involvement from the planning stage. Teachers stated that they were involved from the outset in determining memorization targets, developing learning strategies, and scheduling tahfidz and religious activities. One teacher stated, "We were invited to discuss the memorization targets from the beginning, so we felt responsible for the program's outcomes." This statement demonstrates that teacher involvement is not merely symbolic, but truly provides space for participation in decision-making. This involvement fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility for the program's success. Therefore, teacher involvement in the planning stage is a crucial factor in building a stronger, more focused, and more sustainable shared commitment to implementing the tahfidz program in madrasas.

Observations during the meeting indicated active participation by teachers and supervisors in providing input and evaluating the implementation of the tahfidz program. The discussion was open, and each participant had the opportunity to express their opinions regarding obstacles and solutions encountered in the field. The madrasah principal acted as a facilitator, directing the discussion to maintain a focus on improving the program's quality. This was reinforced by the tahfidz supervisor's statement that the meeting forum provided a flexible and flexible communication space, facilitating the direct communication of challenges. This process demonstrated that shared vision did not occur instantly, but rather through ongoing and reflective dialogue. Thus, interactions in the evaluation forum contributed to the formation of a shared understanding regarding the quality standards of the tahfidz program and religious activities at the madrasah.

In addition, the program's organizational structure is also strengthened through official madrasa documents that show a clear division of tasks between teachers.

Table 2. Teacher Involvement in Building Commitment to the Tahfidz Program		
Program Stages	Forms of Teacher Involvement	Impact
Planning	Determining memorization targets and learning strategies	Increase sense of ownership
Implementation	Teaching and guiding students	Improving program consistency
Evaluation	Providing input in the evaluation forum	Alignment of vision and quality standards

Table 2 shows that shared commitment was formed through teacher involvement throughout the program cycle, from planning to evaluation. Interview results indicated that this involvement fostered a sense of ownership of the program. Observations reinforced the finding that teachers were actively involved in evaluative discussions. Thus, commitment was not merely formal but developed into a collective commitment internalized in daily work practices.

KELAS : 6		REKAPITULASI HAFALAN KELOMPOK TAHFIDZ MINU SUNAN AMPEL 1 TAHUN PELAJARAN 2025/2026																																									
NO	NAMA	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	Al-Falaah	PERSENTASE HAFALAN							
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3	Adeliya putri Rahayu																h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	20	37	54,1	
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5	Aisyah Maharani																	h	h	h	h	h				h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	4	37	10,8	
6	Ainul Yaqin																h	h	h	h	h	h				h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	19	37	51,4	
7	Alfiano Aprilus Saputra																h	h	h	h	h	h				h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	18	37	48,6	
8	Bagus Nur Ashadu Ihafa	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	37	37	100,0	
9	Earlyta Salsabila Ramadani	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	37	37	100,0	
10	Hotija Walimatul Jannah	h	h	h	h												h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	25	37	67,6	
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Figure 1. Recapitulation of Memorization Achievements of Tahfidz Students

Figure 1 shows the memorization achievement data of students in the MINU Sunan Ampel 1 Tahfidz Group for the 2025/2026 Academic Year, compiled in the form of a daily memorization progress monitoring table. Each student is recorded by name and achievement against the predetermined letter target. Green columns indicate memorization submissions that have been successfully completed, while empty columns indicate targets that have not been achieved. The percentage data on the right side of the table quantitatively illustrates the level of memorization achievement of each student. The difference in percentages indicates the variation in achievement between students in the tahfidz learning process. This document serves as a monitoring and evaluation instrument for the tahfidz program used by teachers and supervisors to systematically monitor memorization development and serves as a basis for determining follow-up learning.

Transformation of the Quality of the Tahfidz and Religious Programs

Research results based on documentation of memorization achievements indicate an improvement in the quality of the tahfidz program outcomes in madrasas. Program evaluation data shows that the number of students achieving memorization targets according to level has increased compared to the previous period. Furthermore, the consistency of memorization achievements has also become more stable, no longer fluctuating as in the initial stages of program implementation. Documentation of student attendance in tahfidz and religious activities also shows an increase in discipline. This indicates that program implementation has had a real impact on aspects of learning outcomes. Thus, documentation data is a key indicator that shows a measurable and sustainable transformation of program quality in the madrasa environment.

Based on observations, the implementation of memorization activities such as memorization, murojaah (recitation), and religious activities is more structured and consistent. Students appear more disciplined in following the entire series of daily activities established by the madrasah. Teachers also appear more active in providing direct support during the learning process, both in guiding memorization and providing corrections. Learning interactions are not only instructional but also more communicative and supportive. This condition indicates an improvement in the quality of the learning process both in and outside the classroom. Thus, observations

show that the transformation in quality occurs not only in the results, but also in the process of program implementation.

Interviews with teachers and students revealed changes in motivation and attitudes toward the tahfidz program and religious activities. Teachers reported that students are now more responsive to guidance and more easily guided in the process of memorizing the Quran. Furthermore, students reported feeling more motivated due to the more intensive attention and guidance from their teachers. This suggests that changes in quality are not only structural but also affect the psychological aspects of students. Students' internal motivation has strengthened with increasing social support from the madrasah environment. Thus, the interviews reinforce the finding that quality transformation is also influenced by social and emotional interactions.

Overall, the transformation in the quality of the tahfidz program and religious activities is the result of synergy between the leadership of the madrasah principal, a collaborative culture, and the active involvement of all members of the madrasah community. Relational leadership serves as a key driving factor, strengthening communication, coordination, and trust within the madrasah environment. However, the success of quality improvement is determined not only by leadership alone, but also by consistent training, ongoing evaluation, and the shared commitment of teachers and students. This combination of factors creates a more stable, disciplined, and focused learning system. Thus, quality transformation can be understood as the result of an ongoing interactive process within the madrasah ecosystem.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the implementation of relational leadership by the madrasah principal is characterized by strengthening interpersonal communication, exemplary behavior, and collaboration in managing the tahfidz program and religious activities. This finding is in line with the concept of Uhl-Bien (2006) who emphasized that leadership is a relational process formed through social interaction, not merely an attribute of the individual leader (Ribbat et al., 2024; Soela et al., 2024). In the context of this study, open communication between the madrasah principal, teachers, and students shows that leadership does not operate solely hierarchically, but also horizontally through dialogue and trust. However, this finding also expands previous literature that tends to emphasize aspects of transformational and instructional leadership, because it shows that the success of the program is not only determined by vision or instructions, but also the quality of interpersonal relationships that are consistently built in the daily activities of the madrasah.

Furthermore, the research findings indicate that building shared commitment in the tahfidz program is formed through the active involvement of teachers in program planning, implementation, and evaluation. This finding is consistent with participatory leadership research, which states that the involvement of organizational members in decision-making can increase a sense of ownership and collective responsibility (Gichuhi, 2021; Ogu, 2024). However, unlike traditional managerial approaches that emphasize structural control, this research shows that commitment arises not only from formal structures but also from ongoing dialogical interactions. The process of vision alignment found in this study strengthens the argument that organizational commitment in the context of Islamic education is more effectively

built through fluid social relations, rather than solely through top-down administrative policies.

The findings regarding changes in interactions between madrasah principals, teachers, and students also strengthen the literature on the importance of collaborative culture in educational organizations. Relational leadership has been shown to shift interaction patterns from one-way to more dialogic and participatory. This aligns with previous studies that suggest a collaborative culture increases student motivation and engagement (Huri et al., 2024; Ngoc Tuong Nguyen & Thi Kim Oanh, 2025). However, this study further emphasizes that changes in interactions not only impact social relationships but also directly influence the memorization learning process, such as increased discipline, students' openness in expressing difficulties, and the intensity of teacher guidance. Thus, these findings broaden the understanding that relational leadership has a real operational impact on learning dynamics, not only at the organizational level.

In terms of quality transformation, this study shows an increase in memorization achievement, student discipline, and consistency in the implementation of the tahfidz program. These findings support the theory that social relationship-based leadership can improve the effectiveness of educational organizations (Raso & Hemway, 2022; Shaked, 2024). However, unlike previous studies that emphasized structural outcome indicators, this study emphasizes that quality improvement is the result of a continuous social interaction process. This means that the quality of output cannot be separated from the quality of relationships between actors within the madrasah. The theoretical implication of these findings is the strengthening of the concept of relational leadership in the context of Islamic education, namely that the quality of education is determined not only by the management system, but also by the quality of the relationships that shape the organizational culture.

Practically, this research contributes to the need for madrasah principals to develop relational-based leadership that emphasizes open communication, role modeling, and active collaboration. Teachers need to be substantively involved throughout the program cycle to create a strong collective commitment, while students need to be given space to participate to increase motivation and engagement. The implementation of relational leadership is not only a theoretical concept but also a practical strategy for improving the quality of tahfidz programs and religious activities. Ultimately, this research confirms that the transformation of the quality of Islamic education can be achieved more effectively when leadership is understood not only as a structural position, but as a relational process that builds trust, collaboration, and sustainable shared commitment within the madrasah ecosystem.

CONCLUSION

This study found that the implementation of relational leadership by madrasah principals plays a crucial role in building shared commitment, strengthening interpersonal communication, and improving the quality of tahfidz programs and religious activities through collaborative, trust-based relationships. The main lesson from this study is that the success of educational programs is determined not only by structural and managerial aspects, but also by the quality of social relationships consistently built between madrasah principals, teachers, and students. Scientifically, this study contributes to the development of the concept of relational leadership in the context of Islamic education, particularly in the management of

tahfidz programs, which are rarely studied from a relational perspective. This study also confirms that relationship-based leadership can foster a sustainable transformation of a quality culture. The study's limitations lie in its focus on a single madrasah, making the results difficult to generalize widely. Therefore, further research is recommended to broaden the context, compare madrasahs, and test the relational leadership model at different levels of education.

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