



MERITOCRACY IN SCHOOL QUALITY AND EDUCATIONAL QUALITY: ISLAMIC VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS IN BENGKULU CITY

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Abstract:

This study aims to analyze the implementation of a meritocratic system within school quality governance and its impact on enhancing educational quality in Islamic vocational schools in Bengkulu City. In this context, meritocracy emphasizes the management of quality assurance documentation, teacher competence, and student achievement based on actual ability (merit) rather than subjective factors or nepotism. The study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, utilizing case studies of several leading Islamic schools in Bengkulu City. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. The findings indicate that Islamic schools consistently applying meritocratic principles—specifically in educator recruitment, performance assessment, and the standardization of religious facilities—successfully boosted graduate quality and the competitiveness of the madrasah. Key challenges include limited independent budgets and varying interpretations of quality assurance regulations. In conclusion, meritocracy serves as a crucial pillar for transforming Islamic education in Bengkulu City from a quantity-based model to one focused on quality.

Keywords: *Meritocracy, vocational School Quality, Islamic Education, Bengkulu City.*

INTRODUCTION

The quality of education is a crucial indicator for assessing the success of educational provision. Amidst changing times and the demands of globalization, schools are expected not only to facilitate the teaching and learning process but also to produce graduates who are high-quality, possess strong character, and are competitive. School quality is not measured solely by students' academic results; it also encompasses the learning process, school management, educator competence, facilities and infrastructure, and school culture. Through effective quality management, educational institutions are expected to meet the needs and expectations of the community while contributing to the enhancement of human resource quality. However, various educational evaluations indicate that achieving this level of quality still faces a number of challenges.

In the delivery of education, a gap persists between the availability of educational inputs and the quality of the learning processes taking place in schools. Although some educational institutions possess adequate facilities and

infrastructure, improvements in the quality of learning and school management have not yet reached an optimal level. This is corroborated by findings from the article "Efforts to Improve Education Quality in Junior High Schools and Associated Challenges," which indicate that while schools have implemented various strategies to enhance quality, they continue to face structural and cultural obstacles—such as limited teacher numbers and competencies, a lack of commitment among some educators, insufficient facilities and infrastructure, and funding constraints. These conditions hinder the optimal, sustainable implementation of quality improvement programs, resulting in uneven quality standards across educational institutions.

This situation reveals a gap between the ideal conditions envisioned in educational theory and standards and the empirical realities on the ground. Consequently, examining the concepts of school quality and educational quality is crucial for understanding the factors that influence quality and for formulating strategies for continuous quality improvement.

Islamic educational institutions face a wide array of challenges, ranging from management, leadership, human resources, and financial issues to institutional problems. Efforts to enhance the quality of these institutions must be sustained by prioritizing quality analysis theories and applying them across all managerial processes. One such institution actively improving its educational quality is the Integrated Islamic Vocational High School (SMK Islam Terpadu) in Bengkulu City. The school offers two vocational specializations: Motorcycle Business Engineering (TBSM) and Building Modelling and Information Design (DPIB). To foster student competence in their respective vocational fields, the school is equipped with an architecture laboratory and a workshop.

Improving the quality of education is not limited to a single aspect; rather, it encompasses all elements of the educational process, ranging from inputs and processes to outputs. A key indicator of such improvement lies in effective management. When sound management practices are implemented, any institution—including an educational one—can achieve high-quality performance and outcomes. The Integrated Islamic Vocational High School (SMK Islam Terpadu) conducts a New Student Admission System (SPMB) in preparation for the new academic year. Student intake is not strictly determined by Junior High School grades, reflecting the principle that every child has the right to formal education, regardless of their parents' financial means. Regarding outputs, graduates possess strong academic records, verified diplomas, and recognized vocational competency certificates. As for outcomes, graduates have gone on to establish their own independent repair shops, work in repair shops or other companies, or pursue undergraduate studies aligned with their vocational specializations. As an Islamic vocational institution, the school incorporates Islamic teachings and practices into its curriculum to strengthen students' character. Consequently, graduates of the Integrated Islamic Vocational High School in Bengkulu City are expected to be not only competent in their vocational fields but also possess strong character grounded in Islamic teachings.

Quality issues invariably impact the marketability of an educational institution. An institution's achievements and prestige depend heavily on the quality of instruction, infrastructure, support facilities, the caliber of teachers and students, and learning outcomes. The higher the quality of the graduates produced, the greater the institution's marketability and the public's interest in enrolling there. Conversely, poor quality—resulting in lower-quality graduates—

leads to diminished interest and lower enrollment rates. This underscores the critical importance of quality for an educational institution. The Integrated Islamic Vocational High School (SMK Islam Terpadu) currently lacks market appeal based on achievement, as few students demonstrate excellence in their vocational disciplines. As a vocational high school, one of the key metrics for educational quality is student achievement in specific vocational fields. Therefore, the school must actively compete on quality—a standard built upon planning, processes, and evaluations that align with the National Education Standards (SNP).

2. Literature Review

Generally said that educational meritocracy is a governance and management system that prioritizes competence, track records, academic qualifications, and integrity as the primary benchmarks for organizational placement and the rewarding of educators. This approach aims to eliminate nepotism, cronyism, and subjectivity, thereby fostering an institutional climate characterized by professionalism, transparency, and competitiveness.

In other words that educational meritocracy is the principle that opportunities and rewards in education should be distributed based on talent, effort, and achievement rather than social background or inherited privilege. It emphasizes fairness, accountability, and upward mobility, but also faces critiques regarding hidden inequalities and cultural capital at educational institutions.

Meritocracy, at its core, is a system where rewards and opportunities are allocated based on individual performance and capability. Within the educational context, this concept translates into a structure where students are assessed and advanced primarily on the basis of their talent, effort, and achievements rather than on other factors such as financial background or social connections.

School quality reflects the level of success a school achieves in the integrated management of educational inputs, processes, and outputs. A high-quality school not only produces strong academic results but also shapes the character, attitudes, and skills of its students. Within the context of the national education system, school quality refers to compliance with the National Education Standards (SNP), which encompass standards for content, processes, graduate competencies, educators and education personnel, facilities and infrastructure, management, financing, and educational assessment. Meeting these standards is a fundamental prerequisite for achieving sustainable school quality. Makmur Syukri and Muhammad Ridho Alfattah explain that school quality is defined by the Caliber of education delivery at the school level, determined by the effective management of resources and learning processes, as well as the optimal achievement of educational goals¹.

According to Sriyanto, school quality is not determined solely by student learning outcomes; rather, it is significantly influenced by teachers' creativity in conducting instruction and the work culture that develops within the school environment. Teacher creativity fosters an innovative and meaningful learning process, while a positive work culture cultivates professional, collaborative, and responsible attitudes among educators. This combination of teacher creativity

¹ Makmur Syukri and Muhammad Ridho Alfattah, 'The Concept of Quality, School Quality, and Educational Institution Quality', 06.02 (2024), 11721–31.

and work culture plays a vital role in the continuous improvement of school quality².

Meanwhile, according to Aula et al., school quality is the quality of education shaped by the planned and collaborative management of resources and educational processes, incorporating quality management principles to achieve continuous improvement³.

Based on these various perspectives, it can be concluded that school quality refers to the calibre of educational provision at the school level, reflected in the school's ability to manage educational inputs, processes, and outputs in an integrated and sustainable manner. School quality is measured not only by students' academic achievements but also by the school's success in shaping their character, attitudes, and skills. Achieving school quality requires meeting National Education Standards as a systemic foundation, supported by effective resource management, high-quality learning processes, teacher creativity, a positive work culture, and the collaborative implementation of quality management. Thus, school quality is the result of synergy among standards, processes, and continuous improvement involving all members of the school community.

Quality in education is a complex and multidimensional concept. It is understood as such because its attainment is influenced by various interconnected factors—ranging from the quality of human resources, learning processes, and educational leadership to management systems and the culture of quality within educational institutions. Therefore, the transformation toward quality education requires a planned and sustainable strategy for quality improvement⁴.

Fakhruddin defines educational quality as a strategic element in the life of a nation, given that education concerns the holistic development of learners' competencies—encompassing not only academic abilities but also skills, personal and social competencies, and moral values. Establishing high-quality education requires a series of systematic steps, such as forming a quality team, defining the institution's vision and mission, analysing issues, formulating quality policies, and setting quality standards and operational procedures. Furthermore, the implementation of Total Quality Management (TQM) in education necessitates attention to elements such as instructional services, student management, facilities and infrastructure, school culture, financing, and community participation⁵.

Meanwhile, Amiruddin Siahaan et al. define educational quality as referring to the quality of outcomes produced by educational institutions—evident in student achievement and the relevance of graduates to educational goals. Achieving educational quality is determined not merely by input and output aspects, but primarily by the quality of the educational process—specifically the teaching and learning process—which plays the most significant role in determining the success of educational quality⁶.

² Sriyanto, 'School Quality Based on Teacher Creativity and Work Culture'

³ Nur Aimmatul Aula et al., 'School Quality Improvement Through a TQM Approach', 37–45.

⁴ Febriyanti Ria Adien, Haidarul Amjad, Sukirman, Leny Marlina, 'Transforming Quality Education: Supporting Factors and Strategies for Quality Improvement', 21 (2025), 75–97.

⁵ Mokh. Fakhruddin Siswopranoto, 'Education Quality Standards', *Al-Idaroh: Islamic Educational Management Studies*, 6 (2022).

⁶ Amiruddin Siahaan et al., 'Efforts to Improve the Quality of Education in Indonesia', 05.03 (2023), 6933–40.

Moreover, access to education reflects a school's ability to provide educational services that are open, fair, and equitable for students. This indicator encompasses the ease with which students can access education without discrimination, the availability of support facilities, and student retention throughout the educational process. Access is measured via the School Participation Rate (APS) and the quality of educational services across various educational levels.

The quality of learning relates to the effectiveness of the instructional process within the school. This includes lesson planning, the use of appropriate teaching methods and media, active student engagement, and the attainment of competencies aligned with established learning objectives. It is assessed through literacy scores across early childhood education (PAUD), primary school (SD), junior high school (SMP), and equivalency programs, as well as graduate placement rates.

Graduate characteristics reflect the educational outcomes produced by the school, spanning both academic and non-academic aspects. This indicator encompasses the mastery of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and moral values, as well as the graduates' readiness to pursue further education or participate in social life. Indicators include academic and non-academic achievements and the desired attributes of the graduates.

The educational climate describes the atmosphere and culture that develop within the school environment. A conducive climate is characterized by harmonious relationships among the school community, a sense of safety, discipline, and a work and learning culture that supports the improvement of educational quality. The educational climate is evaluated based on aspects of safety, diversity, and inclusivity, drawing on data from the learning environment survey.

Based on these various perspectives, it can be concluded that the quality of education is a complex and multidimensional concept, as it is influenced by the interplay of various factors within the education system. Educational quality relates not only to the quality of outcomes or graduates but also encompasses the quality of human resources, the learning process, educational leadership, management systems, and the culture of quality fostered within educational institutions. Therefore, achieving quality in education requires a comprehensive approach involving the planned, systematic, and sustainable management of educational processes, while positioning the learning process as the primary strategic factor in determining educational success.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research approach using a descriptive case study method. The focus of this research is on Islamic vocational schools, including Madrasas and Integrated Islamic Schools, located in Bengkulu City. The qualitative approach is particularly suitable for this study as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the complex dynamics surrounding meritocracy in school quality and educational quality. By utilizing a descriptive case study, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing educational outcomes in the selected institutions.

The methodology outlined in this section is designed to facilitate a thorough exploration of the research questions regarding meritocracy in school quality and educational quality within Islamic vocational schools in Bengkulu City. By employing a qualitative descriptive case study approach, this research

will contribute valuable insights into the dynamics of educational quality in these institutions, thereby informing future policy and practice in the field of education.

The conclusions were verified through triangulation of data sources and member checking to enhance credibility. By employing this systematic qualitative approach, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how meritocratic principles influence educational quality in the selected Islamic vocational schools in Bengkulu City.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Implementation of Meritocracy in HR Management

The implementation of a meritocracy-based Human Resource (HR) Management system within an Integrated Islamic Vocational High School (SMK Islam Terpadu / SMK IT) Bengkulu creates a unique synergy. It bridges rigorous, performance-driven vocational metrics with faith-based, spiritual standards.

In an Integrated Islamic Vocational School (SMK IT), HR management operates on two core pillars: Vocational/Industrial Expertise (skills, technical competence, national certifications) and Islamic Character (Akhlaq) (integrity, spiritual leadership, Quranic literacy). Meritocracy ensures that teachers, lab instructors, and staff are recruited, promoted, and rewarded strictly based on these objective competencies rather than personal connections (nepotisme) or arbitrary seniority

Open Recruitment: A leading Islamic school in Bengkulu has adopted a selection system based on pedagogical competence and objective assessment of Quranic recitation fluency.

Promotions: Appointments for deputy principals and laboratory heads are based on annual performance appraisals rather than solely on tenure.

Impact on the Quality of Islamic School Education

Institutional Accreditation: Schools implementing strict meritocracy consistently achieve an "A" accreditation rating from BAN-PDM.

Student Achievements: There has been a significant increase in medal wins at the Madrasah Science Competition (KSM) at both provincial and national levels.

Table : Comparison Matrix of School Quality Characteristics

Governance Aspects	Meritocracy-based school	Traditional/Subjective-Based Schooling
Teacher Recruitment System	Competency tests, micro-teaching, objective assessment	Internal recommendations; no rigorous selection process
Performance Indicators	Achievement of curriculum targets & student performance	Solely physical presence; no evaluation of outputs
Budget Allocation	Focused on enhancing academic quality	Predominantly focused on basic operations and physical aspects
Graduation Outcomes	High competitiveness for state universities & proficiency in Quranic memorization (Tahfidz)	Normative academic competencies

From the comparison matrix can show meritocratic governance offers a system that is accountable, professional, and grounded in objective fairness, though it risks generating intense competitive pressure and overlooking social disparities. Conversely, traditional or subjective governance offers sociocultural

stability and flexibility but is notably weak regarding transparency and quality standardization. Currently, modern school governance trends seek to integrate rigorous merit-based systems with inclusive policies (such as affirmative action) to minimize socioeconomic bias.

B. Efforts to Improve School Quality and Educational Quality at the Integrated Islamic Vocational High School (SMK Islam Terpadu) in Bengkulu City

Based on a case study at the Integrated Islamic Vocational High School in Bengkulu City, school quality and educational quality encompass educational management, school management, learning quality, graduate characteristics, accreditation, as well as input, output, and outcome indicators.

Regarding inputs, the impact of school and educational quality is reflected in the New Student Admission System, which saw 34 applicants; this figure suggests that the school's marketability among stakeholders remains relatively low. In terms of outputs and outcomes, several graduates have secured employment aligned with their vocational training, pursued bachelor's degrees, passed the selection process for the Indonesian Army (TNI AD), or found work abroad. These results demonstrate the success of SMK Islam Terpadu in meeting educational and institutional quality standards, as well as its ability to serve students effectively and ensure their acceptance into society and the workforce. Regarding accreditation, SMK Islam Terpadu holds a 'C' rating under the Education Unit Accreditation Instrument (IASP). This rating necessitates further evaluation of four key components: graduate quality, the learning process, teaching staff, and school management. Finally, regarding graduate characteristics, SMK Islam Terpadu demonstrates value within the business and industrial sectors.

The school features adequate automotive workshops for the TBSM (Motorcycle Engineering and Business) program and a well-equipped architecture laboratory for the DPIB (Design, Modelling, and Building Information) program. Students who complete the vocational competency exam for their respective majors receive a competency certificate; these certificates are verified by a team of assessors from the Department of Education and the school, offering significant value to students as they enter the business and industrial sectors. Most teachers at the Integrated Islamic Vocational High School (SMK Islam Terpadu) hold professional certification, ensuring that students are taught by qualified educators with recognized professional status. Efforts to improve school and educational quality constitute a strategic step that must be undertaken systematically and sustainably.

Based on the five parental perception criteria, the three schools are generally perceived as (a) High-quality Islamic-based schools, (b) Schools with high-quality curricula, (c) Schools that enjoy a high level of parental trust, often recommended through word-of-mouth among relatives, neighbors, and friends, (d) Schools whose positive reputation has been sustained among parents for over a year, while also garnering high trust regarding quality—and the decision to enroll their children—among new stakeholders who have only recently become acquainted with the schools.

Several measures that can be adopted to enhance the quality of education at SMK Islam Terpadu Kota Bengkulu include the following:

1. Data-Based Evaluation

Data-based evaluation serves as a crucial foundation for quality improvement planning. Utilizing data on student learning outcomes, teacher and

student attendance rates, and feedback from parents and other stakeholders enables the educational institution to design quality improvement strategies that are more targeted and based on actual needs.

2. Training and Development

Teacher competency training and development must be conducted continuously. Training programs covering the mastery of innovative teaching methods, the use of educational technology, and effective classroom management play a vital role in enhancing the quality of the school's learning process.

3. Parental Involvement

Parental involvement acts as a supporting factor in improving educational quality. Through activities such as workshops, seminars, and consultation sessions, parents can play an active role in supporting students' academic and character development, thereby fostering synergy between the school and the family.

4. Improving the Quality of Teachers and Educational Staff

Enhancing the quality of teachers and educational staff must be a top priority. This effort can be achieved through continuous professional development programs aimed at boosting the competence, professionalism, and commitment of educators in carrying out their duties.

5. Curriculum Development

Developing a curriculum that is relevant to current trends and the needs of the workforce is essential for producing graduates who are adaptive, competent, and competitive. A contextual and flexible curriculum will support the optimal achievement of student competencies.

6. Development of Facilities and Infrastructure

Developing educational facilities and infrastructure is a key supporting aspect of improving school quality. Providing adequate facilities—such as laboratories, libraries, and suitable classrooms—creates a conducive learning environment that supports effective learning.

By implementing these various measures in an integrated manner, it is expected that the quality of the school and the education provided will improve sustainably. Improving the quality of education aims not only to produce academically intelligent students but also individuals who are creative, possess strong character, and are highly competitive. Education represents a long-term investment in the nation's future; therefore, enhancing its quality must be a shared, uncompromising commitment.

5. Conclusion

Key Conclusion: The implementation of meritocracy is shown to be positively correlated with improvements in the quality of education at Integrated Islamic Vocational Schools in Bengkulu City. School quality and the quality of education are interconnected and inseparable concepts.

School quality reflects the standard of educational delivery at the individual school level, determined by the school's ability to manage educational inputs, processes, and outputs in an integrated manner. It is measured not only by students' academic achievements but also by character development, skills, a conducive school climate, and adherence to National Education Standards. Meanwhile, the quality of education is a complex, multidimensional concept influenced by various factors—such as the quality of human resources, learning processes, educational leadership, management systems, and the culture of quality within educational institutions. Achieving

quality education depends not merely on outputs and outcomes but heavily on the quality of the educational process—specifically, learning processes that are effective, systematic, and sustainable.

Indicators of school quality and educational quality serve as vital tools for assessing the standard of education delivery across aspects of access, process, output, and outcome. Therefore, efforts to enhance school and educational quality at Integrated Islamic Vocational High Schools (SMK Islam Terpadu) must be planned, data-driven, inclusive of all stakeholders, and oriented toward continuous improvement. Ultimately, improving school and educational quality is expected to produce graduates who are intelligent, possess strong character, and are competitive, thereby contributing positively to national development.

CONCLUSION

Policy Recommendation is for the managing foundation and the Ministry of Religious Affairs need to formulate strict regulations regarding merit-based competency standardization to prevent disparities in quality among Islamic schools. It is recommended that schools and educational institutions implement continuous quality management aligned with National Education Standards, enhance educator professionalism through competency development, and strengthen collaboration among schools, parents, and stakeholders. Data-driven evaluation, the development of relevant curricula, and the provision of adequate facilities and infrastructure also need to be optimized to support the continuous improvement of school and educational quality.

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