

**Enhancing *madrasah*'s excellence through innovative leadership: A case study at  
*Madrasah Tsanawiyah Negeri 1 Bireun***

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**Abstract**

This study explores the role of innovative leadership in advancing the excellence of *Madrasah Tsanawiyah Negeri* (MTsN) 1 Bireuen. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis involving the school principal and subject teachers. The findings indicate that the principal exhibits a comprehensive understanding of innovative leadership by promoting teacher autonomy, adopting novel instructional models, facilitating professional development, and encouraging community engagement. Notable innovations identified include student character development, the integration of digital learning technologies, and enhancements to school infrastructure. The study concludes that innovative leadership is pivotal in cultivating a collaborative, adaptive, and high-quality learning environment within Islamic educational settings.

Keywords: Digital learning integration, innovative leadership, Islamic education management, *madrasah* excellence, teacher autonomy

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**Introduction**

The success and quality of educational institutions are fundamentally influenced by the leadership that guides them. This influence is especially pronounced in Islamic educational institutions such as *madrasahs*, which face multifaceted challenges that require leaders not only to manage day-to-day operations but also to actively transform and innovate learning environments. Although numerous studies have examined various leadership styles and their effectiveness in education (Prasetyo & Ilham, 2022; Hutahayan, 2023), relatively little attention has been devoted to the concept of leadership attribution—a cognitive process through which individuals interpret and assign the causes of organizational outcomes to specific leadership behaviors.

Leadership attribution theory offers a valuable framework for understanding how key stakeholders, including teachers and staff, perceive the principal's actions as instrumental in driving the success or failure of educational innovations. This perspective is particularly salient in the context of *madrasahs*, where leadership encompasses not only administrative responsibilities but also embodies religious, cultural, and pedagogical authority. Such dual

roles intensify the impact of leadership perceptions on institutional development and educational quality.

While previous research has largely focused on transformational and instructional leadership within madrasah settings (Pestalozi et al., 2019; Jakavonytė-Staškuvienė & Barkauskienė, 2023), there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning how the attribution of innovative leadership specifically influences school performance and excellence. In particular, empirical investigations into how principals' innovative leadership is perceived by their subordinates—and how these perceptions translate into tangible improvements in madrasah development—are scarce.

This study aims to address this gap by exploring the attribution of innovation-oriented leadership and its contribution to the advancement of madrasah excellence. By focusing on MTsN 1 Bireuen as a case study, this research provides context-specific insights into the processes through which perceived innovative leadership facilitates the transformation of Islamic schools into dynamic, competitive, and adaptive educational institutions.

Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to analyze the concept of innovative leadership attribution and examine its role in fostering madrasah excellence, thereby offering a nuanced understanding of how leadership perceptions can drive educational innovation and institutional success.

## **Method**

### ***Research Design***

This study employed a qualitative research design using descriptive survey techniques to investigate the attribution of innovative leadership in the advancement of madrasah excellence. A qualitative approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions, experiences, and meanings attributed to leadership practices within the specific context of MTsN 1 Bireuen. This design aligns well with the research objectives as it allows for a rich, contextualized exploration of complex social phenomena that quantitative methods alone may not fully capture.

### ***Participants***

The study involved three key informants: one school principal and two subject teachers at MTsN 1 Bireuen, a public Islamic junior high school located in Aceh Province, Indonesia. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement and significant roles in implementing innovative educational initiatives within the school. The principal, as the primary leader, provided insights into leadership strategies, while the teachers offered perspectives on how these strategies impacted classroom and school dynamics. All participants were fully informed about the study's purpose and gave their informed consent prior to data collection. Demographic details, including age and gender, were documented to contextualize the findings, although the small sample size limits generalizability.

### ***Materials and Instruments***

Data were collected using a combination of semi-structured interview guides, observation checklists, and document analysis protocols. The semi-structured interviews were designed to elicit detailed responses regarding perceptions of innovative leadership, challenges encountered, and examples of school improvement initiatives. The observation checklist facilitated systematic recording of teaching and managerial activities that reflected leadership practices in action. Additionally, relevant school documents—such as strategic plans, policy manuals, and reports on professional development programs—were reviewed to triangulate and enrich the qualitative data. Instruments were adapted from established leadership and educational innovation frameworks (e.g., Bass & Avolio, 1994) to ensure content validity.

### ***Procedure***

Data collection was conducted over a two-month period from July to August 2023. Initially, the researcher obtained permission from school authorities and scheduled interviews with the principal and teachers. Each interview session lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accuracy. Observations were carried out during regular school hours, focusing on leadership interactions, teaching methods, and collaborative activities. Documentation review occurred concurrently, with careful selection of materials relevant to innovative leadership practices. Throughout the process, ethical considerations such as confidentiality and voluntary participation were strictly upheld.

### ***Data Collection***

Data collection involved multiple sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. The researcher personally conducted all interviews and observations, maintaining a neutral and non-intrusive stance to encourage honest and open responses. The triangulation of data sources—interviews, observations, and documents—enhanced the study's validity by cross-verifying information. Field notes were taken during observations to capture contextual details and non-verbal cues. The sequential data collection allowed for iterative reflection and refinement of interview questions based on emerging themes.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data analysis followed the qualitative data analysis model developed by Miles and Huberman (1994), consisting of three interrelated stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. During data reduction, the researcher systematically filtered, coded, and organized raw data to focus on key themes related to innovative leadership attribution. The coded data were then displayed in thematic matrices and narrative summaries to identify patterns, relationships, and discrepancies across data sources. Finally, conclusions were drawn and rigorously verified through triangulation and member checking with participants to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

## **Results**

This study found that the attribution of innovative leadership by the principal of MTsN 1 Bireuen played a crucial role in advancing the quality and excellence of the madrasah. Through qualitative data analysis, four primary themes emerged that illustrate how innovative leadership was perceived and operationalized within the institution.

**Table 1**  
***Interview Quotations on Innovative Leadership Attribution***

<b>No.</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Quotation</b>	<b>Informant</b>
1	Understanding of Innovative Leadership	“As a principal, we must innovate, introduce new ideas, and make improvements. Our efforts include improving staff quality, enhancing discipline, supporting innovative teaching, and providing adequate facilities.”	Principal (Informant 1)
2	Empowerment and Support for Teachers	“The principal encourages us to improve teaching quality. We are supported to make learning enjoyable and effective.”	Teacher (Informant 2)
3	Development of Innovative Learning Models	“In creating enjoyable lessons, the principal fully supports us by providing the tools we need and praising teachers who innovate.”	Teacher (Informant 2)
4	Strategic Efforts to Achieve Madrasah Excellence	“Programs like role model training, digital content workshops, and classroom modernization have helped us develop holistically and compete academically.”	Principal (Informant 1)

The interview data clearly demonstrate that the principal of MTsN 1 Bireuen possesses a deep and practical understanding of innovative leadership, which is reflected in proactive institutional initiatives. This understanding extends beyond theory into deliberate actions aimed at empowering teachers, encouraging pedagogical creativity, and aligning school programs with a vision of excellence. The principal's leadership style fosters an environment where innovation is not only encouraged but structurally supported and rewarded.

The first theme reveals that the principal has a comprehensive grasp of innovation-oriented leadership, manifesting in efforts to improve human resources, discipline, and learning facilities. This foundational understanding sets the tone for the leadership practices observed. The second theme highlights the importance of teacher empowerment, where the principal creates autonomy and provides motivational support, enabling educators to experiment with and implement novel teaching methods. The third theme focuses on the tangible development and institutionalization of innovative learning models, such as project-based and student-centered approaches, which are actively promoted and resourced by the leadership. Lastly, the principal's strategic programs—encompassing character education, religious enrichment, digital literacy, and infrastructure enhancement—illustrate a holistic approach to madrasah excellence. These initiatives reflect a vision that balances academic achievement with moral and technological advancement, thereby positioning the school competitively within the educational landscape.

Collectively, these findings underscore that innovative leadership at MTsN 1 Bireuen is multifaceted: it is conceptual, empowering, operational, and strategic. The principal's role as an innovation catalyst is vital in shaping a collaborative, adaptive, and high-quality learning environment that meets the evolving needs of Islamic education today.

## **Discussion**

### ***Conceptualization of Innovative Leadership Attribution***

The findings of this study confirm that innovative leadership attribution significantly influences the development of madrasah excellence. This aligns with attribution theory, which explains how followers interpret leaders' behaviors as the source of success or failure (Benoliel et al., 2020). At MTsN 1 Bireuen, teachers attributed their principal's encouragement and actions as key drivers of innovation, not merely formal instructions.

One key insight from this study is that perceived support not just policies plays a central role in shaping innovative behaviors among teachers. This adds to the existing literature by showing that the way leadership is interpreted can be as important as the leadership itself. For instance, teachers responded positively when they felt trusted and recognized for their innovations, even when material resources were limited.

These findings are consistent with (Domínguez Escrig et al., 2016), who emphasized the role of altruistic leadership in fostering innovation through organizational learning. However, our study contributes a contextual insight by showing how such innovation unfolds within an Islamic education setting, where leadership is also tied to moral and religious authority.

The integration of digital tools, character-building programs, and inclusive learning strategies reflects the principal's awareness of 21st-century education demands. This is aligned with the vision of Education 5.0 (Sliwka et al., 2024), where values and technology must be integrated. More importantly, teachers recognized these strategies as part of a broader innovative leadership model, thereby reinforcing a culture of change within the madrasah.

Another critical finding is the strategic alignment between leadership actions and institutional goals. The structured programs such as teacher training, student character

workshops, and community collaboration—were perceived as coherent and purposeful. This aligns with (Safitri & Prasetyo, 2022), yet our study uniquely shows how this coherence is recognized and internalized by educators, further enhancing its impact.

Overall, this study contributes to the field by emphasizing that attributed innovation how leadership actions are understood by subordinates can catalyze meaningful change. While past studies have examined leadership styles, few have explored how interpretations of leadership behaviors create motivation and institutional transformation, especially in religious educational contexts like madrasahs.

### ***Strategies for Creating an Excellent Madrasah***

The quality of schools is a crucial aspect of education. This quality depends not only on physical facilities or the provided curriculum but also greatly on the skills of the educators within it. Educators' skills play a significant role in the development of school quality. There is a need to develop long-lasting and inclusive participation forums (Suryani et al., 2023). Regular meetings, forums, and other interactive trainings are some ways that MTsN 1 Bireuen can inspire and engage stakeholders in creating and implementing projects that improve teaching quality.

Creating an excellent madrasah requires a comprehensive and sustainable strategy. It is essential for the madrasah principal to foster an inclusive and achievement-driven school atmosphere. This can be achieved by developing values that encourage collaboration, open communication, and fairness (Tajudin & Aprilianto, 2020). Through this collaboration, the madrasah can create an environment that supports students' emotional, social, and academic growth, thus creating an effective and sustainable educational ecosystem.

When conducting research, the author found that to improve the madrasah's excellence, the school implemented several programs, including:

**Tabel 2**

***Programs for Enhancing Madrasah Excellence***

<b>No</b>	<b>Program</b>	<b>Competency Target</b>
1	Role Model Training	Development of student character and morals
2	Islamic Activities Habit Formation	Strengthening religious values
3	Religious Extracurricular Activities Program	Enhancement of special skills
4	Character Workshops and Seminars	Improvement of student competencies
5	Classroom, Alef, and E-learning Development Training	Mastery of educational technology
6	Digital Content Creation Training	Creativity in learning
7	Digital Arts Classes	Development of student creativity
8	Improvement of facilities and infrastructure	Comfortable and effective learning environment

The research findings indicate several strategies implemented by the principal of MTsN 1 Bireuen to achieve an excellent madrasah, including the development of student character. This is done through role model training, forming habits of Islamic activities, character workshops and seminars, establishing digital classrooms, supervision, and collaboration. Additionally, the principal instills religious values, such as providing quality religious education and setting examples in daily life.

Furthermore, teacher development is also a key focus. This development occurs through yearly and semester-based teacher training, collaboration among teachers, and training on learning management systems such as Classroom, Alef, and e-learning. Training on lesson content creation is also provided, along with regular performance evaluations and reward systems for teachers who meet their targets. The evaluation helps identify areas for improvement and ongoing professional development.

Through these efforts and collaboration, the madrasah can create an environment that supports the emotional, social, and academic growth of students, thus fostering an effective and sustainable educational ecosystem.

### ***The Role of the Madrasah Principal's Leadership***

The principal of MTsN 1 Bireuen plays a central role in operationalizing innovative leadership. Beyond formal authority, the principal acts as a strategic leader who develops the school's vision, manages resources, and initiates institutional transformation. These findings support (Liu et al., 2023), who argue that effective leadership includes the capacity to influence organizational culture and align teams toward shared goals.

The leadership style observed in this study reflects a transformational model, where the principal motivates and empowers teachers, encourages experimentation, and aligns school activities with long-term strategic goals. This is consistent with the findings of (Manan, 2019; Sonedi et al., 2018), who emphasize that strong madrasah leadership fosters professionalism and teacher development through collaborative systems.

One distinguishing element in this context is the dual authority held by the principal as both administrative manager and moral leader. In Islamic education settings, principals must navigate not only institutional goals but also the spiritual expectations of the community. As highlighted by (Sari et al., 2021) madrasah principals are expected to embody integrity, guide value-based learning, and serve as role models for religious and educational conduct.

This dual role contributes to a broader understanding of how innovative leadership functions in value driven institutions. The study reveals that when principals combine strategic innovation with moral leadership, they not only improve academic outcomes but also build trust and cohesion across stakeholders.

Therefore, the principal's role is not limited to introducing change but also ensuring that change is embraced within a shared ethical and educational framework, which enhances the sustainability of innovation within the madrasah.

### ***The Impact of Innovative Leadership on Enhancing an Excellent Madrasah***

Research at MTsN 1 Bireuen reveals that innovative leadership has a significant impact on improving the quality and status of the madrasah as an excellent educational institution. The madrasah's principal and teachers, by implementing an innovative leadership style, have been able to create a dynamic learning environment that is responsive to the changing needs of modern education (Safitri & Prasetyo, 2022). This leadership is manifested through various strategies, such as the application of project-based learning that is relevant to students' real-life experiences (Prastiwi & Widodo, 2023), as well as the adoption of technology in flipped learning, which shifts the role of teachers to proactive learning facilitators (Sliwka et al., 2024; Iptian, 2019).

Additionally, the implementation of contextual and cooperative learning models demonstrates that the teachers at MTsN 1 Bireuen do not merely deliver the lesson content, but also connect it with students' real-world experiences, making the learning process more meaningful and effective. As a result, students show improvement not only in academic achievement but also in critical thinking skills and creativity (Bellibaş et al., 2022), which, in turn, enhances the reputation of the madrasah as an excellent educational institution.

Innovative leadership at MTsN 1 Bireuen also facilitates the development of an inclusive and collaborative learning environment, where every student has the opportunity to develop according to their individual potential. This, in turn, strengthens the position of the madrasah as a model for innovative and high-performing learning at both the regional and national levels.

The research findings are supported by Macuzic and Hafizin, who state that one of the key factors that can help a madrasah achieve its vision, mission, goals, and targets through

programs implemented in a methodical, creative, inventive, and successful manner is strong leadership from the principal, who must also have management skills (Hafizin, 2021; Macuzic et al., 2016). Effective management of educational staff is crucial, as teachers are a primary strategic component of a madrasah. They must be innovative and dedicated in overseeing the learning process and capable of addressing educational challenges to ensure the madrasah remains competitive in terms of quality.

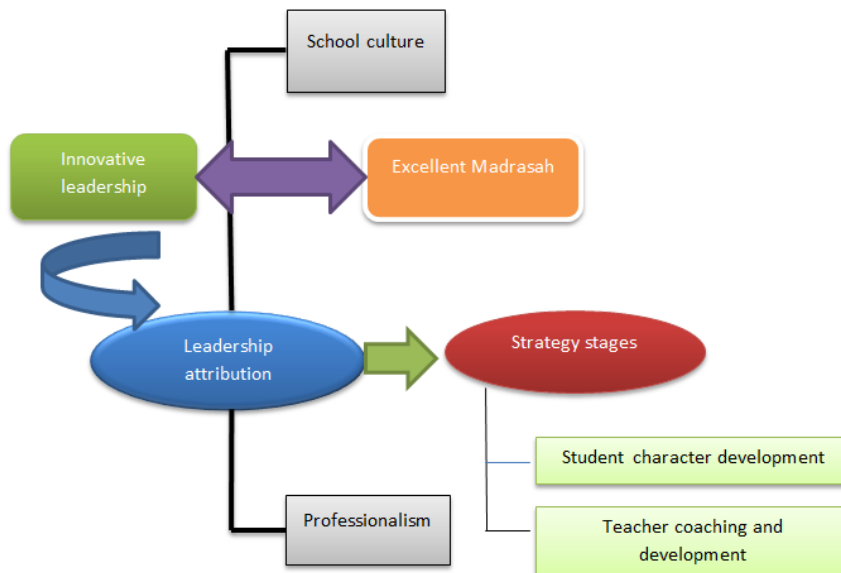
This research highlights the important role of the innovative leadership of the madrasah principal and the management of educational staff in improving the madrasah's quality. Moreover, the effective management of educational staff, especially teachers, is considered strategic in ensuring an effective learning process that is responsive to contemporary educational issues. The findings emphasize that madrasahs capable of managing leadership and human resources effectively will be able to compete in enhancing educational quality.

During the researcher's observation, it was found that the principal's leadership plays a key role in gathering and directing all available resources while working with the broader educational community. Meanwhile, Pitriani's study suggests that a social structure fostering equality, collaboration, and intellectual freedom is necessary to promote the success of an excellent madrasah (Pitriyani, 2023).

The research also indicates that the principal's leadership plays a significant role in forming strength and authority in managing resources and mobilizing cooperation with the educational community. Research by Aman emphasizes that the success of an excellent madrasah also depends on a supportive social system, such as cooperation, intellectual freedom, and equality among all parties involved (Aman-Ullah et al., 2024). From these findings, it is clear that both studies emphasize the importance of innovative leadership in shaping a supportive and collaborative social environment to achieve educational excellence.

The data collected has helped the madrasah principal perform their role as a leader and has led to the development of several plans and strategies to realize the vision and mission for the advancement of the madrasah. These include: an annual work schedule, the principal's specific work schedule, the madrasah activity schedule, implementation of managerial functions and duties, enforcement of principal competencies, and the creation of a principal performance program based on its components, aspects, and indicators that must be met (Tran Pham & Nguyen Le, 2024). The principal also created long-term work plans in areas such as curriculum, student affairs, management, and organizational programs.

The investigation also revealed barriers to overcoming the difficulties in enhancing the madrasah's excellence. Similar challenges were faced by MTsN 1 Bireuen during implementation. These challenges include: a) limited funding; instructor salaries, classroom maintenance, stationery purchases, and other expenses are prioritized over new funds. b) limitations in both financial and non-financial resources (Hooi & Chan, 2023). Since the leader's goal in this context is to improve student success, the madrasah's human resources, which are a crucial component in every educational institution, must support these efforts.



**Figure 1**  
*Model of Attribution Strategy Stages of Innovative Leadership in Improving Superior Madrasahs*

Figure 1 illustrates the strategic phase model, showing that factors influencing innovative leadership attribution, such as school culture and professionalism, are the starting points for implementing this concept in the madrasah context. In efforts to improve the madrasah's excellence, a series of strategic phases were identified, including the development of student character and teacher training and development. By understanding these factors and strategic phases, the madrasah can adopt effective innovative leadership practices to achieve their strategic goals, such as developing strategic plans, forming work teams, enhancing human resources, and continuous evaluation.

The research findings also suggest that one of the key factors that can help the school achieve its vision, mission, goals, and targets is strong leadership from the principal. This is demonstrated through programs that are implemented gradually, creatively, innovatively, effectively, and with strong managerial skills. Effective administration of educational staff is also crucial. Teachers, as one of the main strategic components of the madrasah, must be innovative, persistent, and capable of handling various educational challenges to ensure the institution can compete based on quality.

There is a culture of excellence in the madrasah, in line with its duties and functions, with every member of the madrasah grounded in professionalism within their respective disciplines. Since the educational output is a collective result of the madrasah's members, rather than an individual one, this is a vital prerequisite for achieving competitive quality. Therefore, the madrasah has a cohesive, intelligent, and dynamic team. Teamwork is a characteristic of the madrasah (Iqbal et al., 2023). The madrasah has gained independence, meaning it must have qualified personnel in their specializations and be able to operate to the fullest without always relying on directions from higher authorities (Vandavasi et al., 2020). The madrasah becomes more independent when the community and its members participate, when its management is transparent, when there is a willingness to change, when continuous improvement assessments are conducted, and when accountability is present (Surya et al., 2021). These elements are essential in efforts to make the madrasah more independent, so that stakeholders can quickly find solutions to any problems.

Ultimately, Innovative Leadership in Enhancing an Excellent Madrasah is a comprehensive transformation in the culture and practices of leadership within the madrasah. By applying this concept, it is expected that the madrasah can create an environment that promotes collaboration, creativity, and diversity, which in turn will enhance the effectiveness of learning and the overall quality of education. Furthermore, it is hoped that madrasahs that implement innovative leadership will become progressive learning centers, easily adaptable to changes, and able to produce graduates who are ready to face the challenges of the future.

The implications of this research suggest an improvement in the madrasah's reputation within the community, which can increase its appeal to students, parents, and other stakeholders, as well as improve public trust in the role of the madrasah in providing quality education.

### **Conclusion**

This study concludes that the attribution of innovative leadership plays a pivotal role in fostering the development of excellence within madrasahs. Specifically, at MTsN 1 Bireuen, the principal's leadership was widely perceived by teachers and staff as innovation-driven, thereby reinforcing institutional initiatives aimed at creating a collaborative, adaptive, and value-centered educational environment.

The findings highlight that innovative leadership is manifested not only through explicit administrative actions and policies but also, and perhaps more critically, through the ways in which these actions are interpreted and internalized by subordinates. Such perceptions serve as a catalyst for enhancing teacher motivation, stimulating creativity, and ensuring alignment with the broader institutional vision and goals. Key strategic initiatives—including character education programs, digital literacy training, and inclusive leadership approaches—were identified as instrumental mechanisms for cultivating a sustainable culture of excellence within the madrasah.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the body of knowledge by extending leadership attribution theory into the specific context of Islamic education. It underscores the significance of perceived leadership behaviors in driving organizational innovation and transformation within religious educational institutions. Practically, the research offers a contextualized model of innovative leadership practices that madrasah principals can adopt to enhance professional development, stakeholder engagement, and overall educational performance.

Despite these contributions, the study acknowledges certain limitations, notably the narrow sample size and the focus on a single institutional setting, which may affect the generalizability of the results. Therefore, future research is encouraged to investigate leadership attribution across diverse types of madrasahs, including those in different geographic and cultural contexts. Additionally, further studies could explore how evolving factors such as digital transformation and globalization impact leadership perceptions and shape school culture in Islamic education, providing deeper insights into the dynamic interplay between leadership and institutional excellence.

### **Conflict of interests**

The author(s) declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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