



Adaptive Leadership of Madrasah Principals in Sustaining the Quality Culture of Private Islamic Senior High Schools in Deli Serdang Regency

Wuri Tamtama Abdi¹, Umi Kalsum², Riswan Hadi³, Suzatmiko Wijaya⁴

¹ Universitas Insaniah Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

² Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

³ Universitas Insaniah Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

⁴ Institut Jam'iyah Mahmudiyah Langkat, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: ✉ wuri.abdi@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Private Madrasah Aliyah must maintain educational quality while working with unequal resources, varied community expectations, and strong dependence on foundations. This study examines how adaptive leadership by madrasah principals sustains quality culture in four private Madrasah Aliyah in Deli Serdang Regency. It aims to explain how principals interpret institutional change, prioritize limited resources, distribute leadership, maintain learning routines, and manage stakeholder relations. The study used a qualitative multisite case study. Data came from semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis involving principals, vice principals, teachers, administrative staff, foundation or committee representatives, and students. The data were processed through transcription, coding, cross-site comparison, and reflexive thematic analysis, with triangulation, member checking, reflective notes, and an audit trail supporting trustworthiness. The findings identify five connected mechanisms: contextual reading of change, negotiation of quality priorities under resource constraints, distribution of responsibilities to internal actors, maintenance of quality through recurring academic and student-development routines, and reinforcement of external relations with foundations, parents, committees, alumni, and communities. Quality culture differed across sites, appearing through pesantren values, administrative order, discipline, or teacher-student closeness. The study concludes that adaptive leadership sustains quality culture through contextual coordination rather than formal control alone. The findings imply that principal development should strengthen diagnostic, collaborative, negotiation, and stakeholder-management skills alongside administrative competence.

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INTRODUCTION

Madrasah Aliyah (MA) occupies a complex position in Indonesia's secondary education system. It must meet national academic standards while

strengthening religious values, student character, and public trust. This task becomes more demanding in private madrasahs because institutional continuity often depends on foundations, tuition capacity, community support, and the availability of teachers who may serve in more than one institution. In Deli Serdang Regency, the educational setting combines urban expansion, peri-urban communities, pesantren traditions, and community-based schools. Regional education statistics show that madrasah services remain an important part of the local education landscape, but institutional capacity varies across schools and districts (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Deli Serdang, 2024; Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Sumatera Utara, 2025). These conditions create a practical problem: private MA must maintain credible learning and institutional standards even when funding, facilities, teacher time, and stakeholder expectations are unequal.

Leadership becomes critical because quality pressures do not arrive in one form. Curriculum changes require teachers to adjust instruction and documentation. Accreditation requires evidence of governance, learning processes, and institutional improvement. Parents expect discipline, religious formation, safe services, and clear communication. Students bring changing learning habits, motivation, and social needs. Foundations may support the principal, but they may also limit decisions through financial priorities or institutional traditions. Recent studies show that school leadership in uncertain conditions requires rapid learning, purposeful action, participation, and trust-building rather than routine administration alone (Bagwell, 2020; Corrigan & Merry, 2022; Fernandes et al., 2023; Pashiardis & Brauckmann-Sajkiewicz, 2022). Successful leadership also works indirectly through organizational conditions, teacher capacity, and shared direction instead of relying on the authority of one individual (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Adaptive leadership provides a useful lens for explaining this problem. In this study, adaptive leadership refers to the principal's capacity to diagnose changing conditions, distinguish routine technical tasks from problems that require collective learning, mobilize relevant actors, and adjust institutional practices without abandoning core values. Its manifestations include reading curriculum and accreditation demands, setting priorities under limited resources, involving teachers in decisions, managing tensions with foundations and parents, and revising routines when existing practices no longer work. Adaptive leadership does not mean continuous improvisation without standards. It combines flexibility with direction. Studies in educational settings associate adaptive leadership with purposeful crisis response, participatory communication, strategic decision-making, stakeholder involvement, resilience,

and organizational learning (Bagwell, 2020; Fernandes et al., 2023; Setiawan et al., 2025; Sott & Bender, 2025).

The outcome examined in this study is quality culture. Quality culture is understood as a shared pattern of values, expectations, routines, communication, evaluation, and corrective action that encourages continuous improvement. It becomes visible through learning supervision, teacher meetings, lesson-plan preparation, student guidance, discipline, follow-up on learning outcomes, and willingness to acknowledge weaknesses. Quality culture therefore differs from document compliance. Documents may record standards, but culture determines whether staff enact them consistently. Research has linked educational quality to principal competence, teacher performance, strategic management, character development, collaboration, and sustainable institutional values (Aimang et al., 2024; Izzah et al., 2024; Ramli et al., 2025; Siswadi et al., 2025; Suriyadi et al., 2022). Other studies show that transformational relationships and supportive learning climates can strengthen teachers' innovative behavior (Vermeulen et al., 2022).

Previous research on madrasah leadership has examined transformative leadership, work commitment, managerial competence, research-oriented management, and general efforts to improve educational quality (Eka Mahmud et al., 2022; Sari et al., 2023; Sugiri & Ma'shum, 2022). This literature confirms that principals matter, but it often treats quality as the outcome of a leadership style or a formal management function. It gives less attention to the daily adaptive process through which private madrasah principals negotiate standards when resources are incomplete, teacher participation is uneven, and foundation or parental expectations change. A further issue concerns the distribution of leadership. Research indicates that shared leadership can support teacher autonomy, professional collaboration, innovation, and school improvement (Lin, 2022; Meyer et al., 2023; Nadeem, 2024). However, leadership distribution in private madrasahs may depend on informal trust and a small number of core teachers, which can both sustain and weaken quality routines.

This study argues that quality culture in private MA is sustained when principals connect five capacities: contextual diagnosis, negotiated prioritization, distributed work, repeated quality routines, and stakeholder trust. No single capacity is sufficient. Contextual diagnosis without follow-up produces awareness but not change. Resource prioritization without participation can create resistance. Delegation without clear routines can make quality dependent on personal relationships. Formal quality procedures without community trust may secure documents but weaken institutional

legitimacy. Based on this argument, the study aims to explain how adaptive leadership operates across four private Madrasah Aliyah in Deli Serdang Regency and how its mechanisms sustain different forms of quality culture. The study contributes a multisite account of adaptive leadership as an institutional practice that links standards, limited capacity, internal collaboration, and external relations.

RESEARCH METHOD

The objects of this study were adaptive leadership practices and the maintenance of quality culture in private Madrasah Aliyah. The cases comprised four institutions in Deli Serdang Regency: MAS Pesantren Modern Darul Ihsan in Hamparan Perak, MAS Nurul Ittihadiyah Lubuk Pakam in Lubuk Pakam, MAS PAB I Sampali in Percut Sei Tuan, and MA Mutiara Sunggal in Sunggal. The sites were selected purposively because all were privately managed and represented different institutional settings, including pesantren-based, administratively oriented, peri-urban, and community-based madrasahs. This variation allowed the study to compare how leadership operated under different foundation structures, teacher cultures, resource conditions, and community expectations.

The study used a qualitative approach with a multisite case study design. This design was appropriate because the research focused on processes, meanings, decisions, relationships, and recurring practices rather than the numerical effect of leadership. Primary data consisted of participant accounts and field observations. Secondary data consisted of institutional documents, including vision and mission statements, work plans, accreditation files, supervision programs, meeting minutes, learning documents, and reports of quality-related activities. The multisite design supported within-site interpretation and cross-site comparison while preserving the distinctive context of each madrasah (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018).

Participants were principals, vice principals, teachers, administrative staff, foundation or committee representatives, and students in grades XI or XII. Each site involved six to eight informants, producing a participant range of 24 to 32 people. Informants were chosen because they had direct experience with principal leadership, learning management, student services, institutional administration, or stakeholder relations. Participant selection continued until the data provided adequate thematic depth and no major new pattern emerged. This decision followed the principle that qualitative sample adequacy depends on information richness, variation, and saturation rather than a fixed numerical threshold (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

The research process consisted of five stages. First, the researchers mapped each site and prepared a case study protocol. Second, they obtained institutional permission, explained the study, and secured informed consent. Third, they collected data through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation of academic and organizational activities, and document analysis. Fourth, they conducted preliminary analysis during fieldwork to identify gaps and determine whether additional information was needed. Fifth, they verified emerging findings through source comparison and limited member checking. Interview guides, observation sheets, documentation guides, field notes, and audio recordings supported data collection.

Data analysis used reflexive thematic analysis. The researchers transcribed interviews, read the data repeatedly, assigned initial codes, grouped related codes, constructed candidate themes, reviewed themes within and across sites, and developed an interpretive narrative. A cross-site matrix compared recurring patterns and institutional differences. The analysis focused on how principals read change, negotiate priorities, distribute responsibility, maintain quality routines, and manage external relations. Trustworthiness was strengthened through source and technique triangulation, limited member checking, reflective researcher notes, an audit trail, and the use of evidence from more than one participant category or data source for each central theme (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Cross-site analysis produced five themes. The themes were present in all four madrasahs, but their expression differed according to institutional history, foundation relations, teacher capacity, and student characteristics. Table 1 summarizes the empirical pattern and the main variation among sites.

Table 1.

Cross-Site Findings on Adaptive Leadership and Quality Culture

Mechanism	Empirical pattern	Institutional variation
Contextual reading of change	Principals assessed curriculum, accreditation, teacher readiness, parental expectations, and student behavior before acting.	Darul Ihsan emphasized pesantren values; Nurul Ittihadiyah emphasized academic administration; PAB I Sampali emphasized discipline; Mutiara Sunggal emphasized personal communication.
Negotiation of	Core programs were	The scope of innovation

Mechanism	Empirical pattern	Institutional variation
quality priorities	protected through prioritization, use of committed teachers, shared facilities, scheduling, and low-cost activities.	depended on funding, teacher time, parent capacity, and foundation support.
Distributed responsibility	Vice principals, senior teachers, homeroom teachers, administrative staff, and activity supervisors carried distinct quality functions.	Some sites used clear formal roles; others relied on a small network of trusted teachers.
Recurring quality routines	Supervision, meetings, document checks, student guidance, and follow-up on learning outcomes maintained quality.	The dominant form was religious habituation, academic administration, disciplinary order, or teacher-student closeness.
External relationship management	Principals coordinated with foundations, parents, committees, alumni, and communities to sustain trust and support.	Parent and foundation involvement varied; alumni support remained largely informal and underdeveloped.

The first theme was contextual reading of institutional change. Principals did not respond to every pressure with the same action. They first assessed curriculum demands, accreditation requirements, teacher readiness, parental expectations, and student behavior. At MAS Pesantren Modern Darul Ihsan, curriculum and student issues were interpreted through pesantren values and religious habituation. At MAS Nurul Ittihadiyah Lubuk Pakam, the principal emphasized lesson planning, learning administration, and teacher coaching. At MAS PAB I Sampali, adaptation appeared through direct instructions and stronger attention to discipline. At MA Mutiara Sunggal, personal communication with teachers and students became the main way to identify problems. Across sites, leadership action began with an assessment of whether the issue concerned administration, learning practice, behavior, or relationships.

The second theme was negotiation of quality priorities under limited resources. All sites reported constraints in funding, facilities, teacher time, or the availability of active staff. Principals responded by protecting core programs rather than attempting to complete every quality agenda at once. They prioritized supervision, student guidance, teacher coordination, basic learning documents, accreditation preparation, and activities considered central

to each madrasah's identity. Senior or highly committed teachers received additional roles. Existing rooms and equipment were scheduled, shared, or used in rotation. Some activities were simplified to reduce costs to the institution and parents. Foundation support influenced how much freedom principals had to introduce new programs or redistribute resources.

The third theme was distributed responsibility. Vice principals supported curriculum administration, student affairs, discipline, and teacher evaluation. Senior teachers helped translate principal instructions, model work standards, prepare learning documents, and guide less experienced colleagues. Homeroom teachers monitored attendance, behavior, learning barriers, and communication with parents. Administrative staff maintained institutional data, reporting, accreditation evidence, and front-line services. Student activity supervisors supported discipline, religious practice, achievement, and emotional closeness with students. Formal role distribution was clearer at the more structured sites. At other sites, principals relied on a small group of trusted teachers whose influence exceeded their formal job descriptions.

The fourth theme was maintenance of quality through recurring routines. Quality practices appeared in classroom supervision, teacher evaluation meetings, checks of learning documents, student guidance, and follow-up on learning outcomes. The emphasis differed by site. MAS Pesantren Modern Darul Ihsan linked supervision and guidance with character, worship, and pesantren discipline. MAS Nurul Ittihadiyah Lubuk Pakam placed stronger attention on academic planning, documentation, and program evaluation. MAS PAB I Sampali emphasized attendance, work order, and student discipline. MA Mutiara Sunggal relied more on teacher-student closeness and personal follow-up. The data showed that quality was maintained through repeated activities rather than occasional accreditation preparation alone.

The fifth theme was external relationship management. Principals communicated with foundations to align institutional values, governance priorities, and resource decisions. Communication with parents focused on morality, discipline, student development, educational services, and problem solving. Committees and community figures helped bridge institutional needs and sustain public trust. Alumni contributed to the madrasah image and informal support, but their involvement was not systematically managed at all sites. External actors could function as sources of support and as sources of pressure. Principals therefore maintained communication while protecting learning and disciplinary standards.

Taken together, the findings show a connected sequence. Principals read the situation, select feasible priorities, assign work to relevant actors, protect

recurring quality practices, and maintain stakeholder support. Institutional variation shaped the form of this sequence. Pesantren values were most visible at Darul Ihsan, administrative organization at Nurul Ittihadiyah, disciplinary control at PAB I Sampali, and personal relationships at Mutiara Sunggal. Despite these differences, all sites depended on a combination of principal direction, teacher participation, routine coordination, and external trust.

Discussion

The findings support the argument that adaptive leadership in private madrasahs is a coordinated process rather than a personal leadership trait. Principals sustained quality when they linked diagnosis, prioritization, participation, routines, and stakeholder trust. This result is consistent with research that describes adaptive leadership as purposeful action under uncertainty and as a capacity to learn while maintaining institutional direction (Bagwell, 2020; Fernandes et al., 2023; Sott & Bender, 2025). The present study extends that argument beyond major crises. Adaptation also occurred in ordinary but persistent conditions, such as incomplete learning documents, uneven teacher commitment, student discipline problems, parental demands, and limited foundation support. These small pressures shaped daily quality more directly than exceptional events.

The first mechanism, contextual reading of change, shows that adaptive action begins with organizational diagnosis. Principals interpreted the same external demand differently because each madrasah had a distinct value base and operating capacity. This finding supports Corrigan and Merry's (2022) view that leadership during change requires attention to context and communication. It also aligns with Setiawan et al. (2025), who connect adaptive leadership with participation and strategic decisions. The added contribution of this study lies in the identification of four diagnostic orientations: value-based, administrative, disciplinary, and relational. These orientations explain why a standard policy does not produce an identical response across private madrasahs. The principal translates the policy through the institution's existing culture.

The second mechanism, negotiated prioritization, shows that limited resources do not automatically eliminate quality practices. Principals protected selected routines and delayed less urgent programs. This pattern differs from an idealized model in which quality depends on complete facilities and stable funding. It confirms that adaptive leadership involves choices about what must continue, what can be simplified, and what should wait. Mustajab et al. (2023) position principals as motivators of quality culture, while Ramli et al. (2025) emphasize values and institutional commitment. The present findings add a resource-allocation dimension. Motivation and commitment became effective

only when principals converted them into practical priorities, role assignments, and feasible activities. This process also carried risk because repeated postponement could normalize low standards. Adaptive prioritization therefore requires minimum quality boundaries, not merely acceptance of scarcity.

The third mechanism concerns distributed responsibility. Quality routines became more stable when vice principals, teachers, homeroom teachers, administrative staff, and activity supervisors held clear functions. This finding agrees with evidence that distributed leadership supports teacher autonomy, professional collaboration, innovation, and school improvement (Lin, 2022; Meyer et al., 2023; Nadeem, 2024). However, the multisite comparison reveals an important distinction. Formal distribution and informal trust-based delegation did not produce the same level of institutional resilience. Informal networks allowed principals to move quickly, especially when staffing was limited. Yet dependence on a few trusted teachers created vulnerability when those teachers were overloaded, transferred, or disengaged. The study therefore reframes distributed leadership as both a capacity and a continuity problem. Private madrasahs need to convert personal trust into documented roles, shared competence, and succession arrangements.

The fourth mechanism shows that quality culture grows through recurring practices. Supervision, teacher meetings, document checks, student guidance, and follow-up formed the operational core of quality at all sites. This result supports studies that connect quality with strategic management, character development, teacher performance, and sustainable values (Aimang et al., 2024; Izzah et al., 2024; Siswadi et al., 2025). It also supports Vermeulen et al. (2022), who show that leadership affects innovation through relational and learning conditions. The distinctive finding is that the same quality mechanism assumed different institutional forms. Religious habituation, academic administration, disciplinary order, and teacher-student closeness were not competing definitions of quality. They were local manifestations of a shared effort to maintain standards. This finding warns against evaluating private madrasahs only through uniform documentation. Evaluation should also examine whether routines are consistent, corrective, and connected to student learning and development.

The fifth mechanism, external relationship management, confirms that private madrasah quality depends on social legitimacy. Foundations influence strategic direction and resource space. Parents influence trust, discipline, and service expectations. Committees and communities provide mediation and social support. Alumni offer reputational and network resources, although the sites had not managed this potential systematically. This finding is consistent

with Flaxman (2023), who emphasizes networking and adaptability in independent school leadership, and with Sumar et al. (2025), who show that character education depends on collaboration among principals, teachers, and parents. The present study adds that stakeholder relations are not supplementary activities in private madrasahs. They are part of the quality infrastructure. Weak trust can reduce enrolment, cooperation, and institutional support even when academic procedures are formally complete.

A further contribution concerns the relationship between quality standardization and institutional identity. The data do not support a choice between national standards and local madrasah character. Principals attempted to translate external standards into routines that staff and communities could accept. Sugiri and Ma'shum (2022) and Sari et al. (2023) describe the principal's role in quality improvement and research-oriented management, while Eka Mahmud et al. (2022) emphasize transformative leadership and work commitment. The present study specifies the mechanism that connects these elements. Translation occurred when principals selected relevant indicators, assigned responsibility, integrated them into existing meetings or guidance activities, and explained their value to foundations and teachers. Quality standards became sustainable when actors understood them as part of institutional work rather than as temporary accreditation requirements.

The combined mechanism can be expressed as a sequence of institutional learning. A change or problem first becomes visible through observation, complaints, documents, or student outcomes. The principal interprets its meaning, identifies the actors who hold relevant knowledge, and determines the minimum standard that must be protected. Responsibility then moves to vice principals, teachers, or staff through meetings, direct instructions, or informal coordination. The institution repeats the selected response until it becomes part of routine practice. Stakeholder feedback either strengthens the routine or requires further adjustment. This sequence clarifies why quality culture is both operational and relational. It depends on what the madrasah repeatedly does and on whether internal and external actors continue to support those actions.

The comparison also reveals that adaptive leadership has limits. Flexibility can solve immediate problems, but excessive reliance on informal arrangements may hide structural weakness. Personal communication can maintain harmony, yet it may produce inconsistent decisions. Using core teachers can secure programs, yet it may increase workload concentration. Simplifying activities can protect affordability, yet it may reduce improvement ambition. These tensions explain why adaptation should not be judged only by short-term

continuity. A stronger indicator is whether temporary solutions develop into shared procedures, broader staff capacity, and stable routines. Nawab and Noor (2025) identify role understanding, training, teacher attitudes, and communication gaps as barriers to instructional leadership. The current findings show that adaptive leadership can manage these barriers, but it cannot permanently replace institutional investment, staff development, and clear governance.

Theoretically, this study connects adaptive leadership with distributed leadership, instructional leadership, and quality culture. Principal influence did not operate through direct command alone. It passed through teacher acceptance, work routines, foundation relations, and community trust. This interpretation supports the broader claim that school leadership affects outcomes by shaping organizational conditions and collective direction (Leithwood et al., 2020). It also explains why principal leadership does not always show a simple direct relationship with student achievement (Chen & Bos, 2023). Leadership becomes meaningful when it changes the conditions under which teachers and other actors work. In private MA, those conditions include the ability to negotiate scarce resources and align formal standards with religious and community values.

For policy, a uniform improvement program may have limited value when it ignores institutional starting points. Madrasahs with strong value-based routines may need support in documentation and academic evaluation. Administratively organized madrasahs may need stronger relational and student-support practices. Discipline-oriented madrasahs may need reflective supervision that moves beyond compliance. Relationship-oriented madrasahs may need clearer procedures and evidence systems. A differentiated mentoring approach would preserve institutional strengths while addressing specific gaps. This implication is relevant to education authorities, foundations, and madrasah supervisors because it converts the study's cross-site differences into practical categories for assistance, monitoring, and leadership development.

The practical implication is clear. Principal development should move beyond accreditation administration and reporting. Training should strengthen contextual diagnosis, priority setting, collaborative decision-making, conflict negotiation, teacher development, documentation of distributed roles, and stakeholder communication. Foundations and education authorities should support mentoring that helps principals institutionalize routines rather than depend on personal influence. Supervisors should assess both compliance evidence and the consistency of learning, guidance, and follow-up practices. Madrasahs should also build alumni databases and structured engagement

mechanisms because the findings show that alumni remain an underused source of social capital. These actions can strengthen quality continuity when leadership or staffing changes.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that adaptive leadership sustains quality culture in private Madrasah Aliyah through five connected mechanisms: reading institutional change, negotiating priorities under limited resources, distributing responsibility, maintaining recurring quality routines, and managing relations with foundations, parents, committees, alumni, and communities. The most important finding is that quality culture does not depend on formal control or accreditation documents alone. It grows when principals translate standards into feasible practices that fit institutional values and capacity. Across the four sites, this translation appeared through pesantren habituation, academic administration, disciplinary order, and teacher-student closeness.

The study adds a contextual model of adaptive leadership for private Islamic education. The model explains that leadership influence moves through diagnosis, negotiated resource use, shared work, repeated practice, and social trust. Its practical value lies in directing principal development toward problem diagnosis, collaborative decisions, role distribution, conflict negotiation, teacher capacity building, and stakeholder communication. Foundations and supervisors should help madrasahs institutionalize these processes so that quality does not depend on one principal or a small group of trusted teachers.

The study has three limitations. It examined four private madrasahs within one regency, so the findings cannot represent all private or public Madrasah Aliyah. The participant range and qualitative design support depth but do not estimate the strength of relationships among variables. The analysis also captured leadership within a limited period and could not determine whether quality routines remain stable after leadership change. Future studies should compare public and private madrasahs, examine urban and rural settings, and use longitudinal designs. Quantitative research can test the relationships among adaptive leadership, teacher commitment, organizational trust, distributed leadership, and quality culture. Further research should also examine gender, foundation governance, and alumni engagement as factors that may shape the continuity of quality practices.

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