



THE LEADERSHIP OF THE *MADRASA* PRINCIPAL IN ENHANCING LEARNING QUALITY AMIDST COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN CENTRAL ACEH REGENCY

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Abstract: The role of the *madrasa* principal is pivotal in an educational institution. The leadership of the *madrasa* head determines the direction and is the main indicator of student achievement and achievements. Maintaining and improving the quality of education is one of the goals of national education, and *madrasa* heads are mandated to make it happen. The quality of learning in Indonesia is still a concern and is far from satisfactory. The COVID-19 pandemic is a scourge for education actors, especially school and *madrasa* principals, who are leaders in educational institutions to maintain the quality of learning. This research aims to determine the problems, strategies, and implications experienced by *madrasa* heads in efforts to maintain or improve the quality of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research is classified as qualitative research using a descriptive analysis approach. This research involved *madrasa* heads in Central Aceh Regency. Based on the results of interviews, it was found that the biggest problem faced by *madrasa* heads during the pandemic was the lack of readiness of teachers and students to carry out distance learning from home. This readiness includes limited internet networks for students to access online learning media. In general, the strategy adopted by *madrasa* principals is to implement shift classes and involve the homeroom teacher in providing materials (printouts) and collecting assignments at school. All of this has implications for the role of *madrasa* heads, who must further increase the level of preparedness, decision-making, application of creative ideas, and risk management to the demands of educational development or emergencies.

Keywords: *Madrasa* Principal, Leadership, Learning Quality

Abstrak: Peran kepala madrasah sangat penting di dalam sebuah institusi pendidikan. Kepemimpinan kepala madrasah menentukan arah dan menjadi indikator utama penentu prestasi dan pencapaian peserta didik. Mempertahankan dan meningkatkan mutu pendidikan menjadi salah satu tujuan pendidikan nasional, dan kepala madrasah diberikan amanat untuk merealisasikannya. Mutu pembelajaran di Indonesia masih menjadi perhatian dan masih jauh dari kata memuaskan. Pandemi COVID-19 menjadi momok bagi pelaku pendidikan, khususnya kepala sekolah dan madrasah sebagai pemimpin di sebuah lembaga pendidikan untuk mempertahankan mutu pembelajaran. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui masalah, strategi dan implikasi yang dialami oleh kepala madrasah dalam upaya mempertahankan ataupun meningkatkan mutu pembelajaran selama pandemi COVID-19. Penelitian ini tergolong ke dalam penelitian kualitatif dengan menggunakan pendekatan descriptive analysis. Penelitian ini melibatkan kepala madrasah yang ada di Kabupaten Aceh Tengah. Berdasarkan hasil wawancara, ditemukan bahwa masalah terbesar yang dihadapi oleh kepala madrasah selama pandemi adalah kurangnya kesiapan guru dan siswa dalam menjalankan pembelajaran jarak jauh dari rumah. Kesiapan ini mencakup terbatasnya jaringan internet bagi siswa untuk mengakses media pembelajaran secara daring. Pada umumnya strategi yang ditempuh oleh kepala madrasah adalah memberlakukan kelas shift dan melibatkan wali kelas untuk memberikan materi (*print out*) dan mengumpulkan tugas di sekolah. Semua ini berimplikasi kepada peranan kepala madrasah yang harus lebih meningkatkan tingkat kesiapan, pengambilan keputusan, penerapan ide kreatif dan manajemen resiko terhadap tuntutan perkembangan pendidikan ataupun dalam keadaan darurat.

Kata Kunci: Kepala Madrasah, Kepemimpinan, Mutu Pembelajaran

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INTRODUCTION

The *madrasa* leader must be able to effectively implement the stated vision, mission, and goals within the educational unit. The primary determinant of achievement and enhancement of student performance in an educational institution is the function of leadership (Ramadhani, 2019). Ensuring and enhancing the caliber of education is essential for a *madrasa* administrator.

By government regulations aimed at enhancing the quality of education, specifically RI Regulation Number 19 of 2005 regarding National Education Standards, which was subsequently amended by RI Regulation Number 57 of 2021, the National Education Standards have been adapted to the evolving dynamics of science and technology, as well as societal needs. The abovementioned regulations pertain to the application of interactive, collaborative, stimulating, enjoyable, and demanding learning methods. These methods aim to create an environment where students can cultivate their talents, interests, creativity, independence, and physical and psychological growth (Peraturan Pemerintah Republik Indonesia, 2005).

Amidst the current period of globalization, various sectors, including education, are experiencing substantial and ongoing transformations. Undoubtedly, the government faces a significant challenge regarding the quality of education in Indonesia, which includes the responsibility of the head of educational agencies, such as the head of a *madrasa*. The fulfillment of an educational institution's vision, mission, and objectives is a response to internal and external demands. Abuddin Nata (2010) stated that internal challenges within an organization or agency arise from the expectations of leaders, teachers, students, and teaching staff. On the other hand, external challenges stem from the expectations of society and other institutions and encompass global issues and fundamental competencies. One of the factors contributing to the poor quality of education in Indonesia is the inadequate management of schools or *madrasas*, as well as the subpar quality of teaching staff. These issues directly impact the educational process and outcomes (Utu & Sintasari, 2021).

In recent times, the global community has been profoundly startled by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has undeniably influenced schooling. In an effort to stop the transmission of the COVID-19 virus, educational activities in schools must be restricted and temporarily halted for an unspecified duration. According to UNESCO, on April 9, 2020, 188 countries suspended educational activity in schools and other educational institutions, including pre-schools, primary schools, secondary schools, vocational schools, and university education institutions. According to estimates, a record-breaking number of pupils, around 1.58 billion or 91.3% of the global student population, experienced disabilities or had their learning activities disrupted.

In response to UNESCO's feedback, Indonesia, particularly in Aceh, has extended the closure of formal and informal educational institutions (such as schools, *madrasas*, Islamic boarding schools, and universities) until 30 May 2020. This decision is based on

the Governor's Instruction Number 04/INSTR/2020 and the Circular Letter from the Ministry of Education and Culture Number 4 of 2020, which address the implementation of education during the COVID-19 pandemic emergency period. Stakeholders in different nations will undoubtedly consider the most pragmatic choice for conducting educational activities without the need for physical attendance at school. Due to technological advancements, multiple forms of media and gadgets now facilitate learning activities without the need for in-person classes. It is achieved through the use of online learning systems. According to Circular No. B 686.1/DI.I/DT. I I/PP. 00/03/2020, issued by the Director General of Islamic Education and the Ministry of Religion, the teacher must manually conduct all learning activities during the COVID-19 pandemic emergency period. All teaching materials and resources should be delivered through SMS, chat messages, applications, and online learning platforms.

In light of the judgments mentioned above and issues, it is evident that the *madrasa* head, as the primary authority figure in a formal educational institution, is faced with yet another task. The COVID-19 pandemic necessitates vigilance from *madrasa* leaders in formulating policies and actions to uphold the comfort and organization of the *madrasa*. Furthermore, *madrasa* leaders must coordinate effectively with all components of the *madrasa* to ensure an ideal and seamless learning experience amidst the ongoing epidemic (Akhyak et al., 2021).

Undoubtedly, extensive research has been conducted on the challenges encountered by *madrasa* administrators in enhancing the educational standards inside their institutions. Nevertheless, the extent of study investigating other difficulties encountered by *madrasa* administrators during the epidemic remains restricted. Hence, considering the present reality, scholars deem it crucial to devise a study examining *madrasa* leaders' influence in enhancing educational quality in Aceh. The research proposes the title: "Leadership of *Madrasa* Principal in Enhancing Learning Quality amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic in Central Aceh Regency".

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Leadership of *Madrasa* Principal

Leadership is commonly defined as a quality or trait an individual can possess to guide a collective or institution. Kadarusman (2012) categorizes leadership into three distinct components: self-leadership, team leadership, and organizational leadership. In essence, self-leadership refers to the capacity to guide oneself to achieve success and avoid failure effectively. On the other hand, team leadership pertains to leading others, necessitating an awareness of one's duties, comprehension of subordinates' circumstances, and a commitment to steering the group toward the desired objective. Organizational leadership is the capacity to guide an organization in achieving its vision and mission.

Leadership, in essence, refers to the capacity and skill to guide, inspire, sway, cultivate, direct, and restrain subordinates and colleagues to successfully and efficiently attain organizational objectives (Kurniadin, 2012; Sutikno, 2012). From an educational perspective, leadership within an educational institution has a crucial role in determining the extent to which it can achieve its vision, mission, and goals. As the leader and

individually accountable for education and learning inside the institution, the head of the *madrasa* must be able to persuade the community that educational activities are progressing smoothly. It can be achieved by effectively collaborating with the *madrasa*'s internal and external stakeholders (Utu & Sintasari, 2021).

Based on the definitions provided and the specific context of a *madrasa* head as a leader in an educational institution, it can be inferred that the leadership of a *madrasa* head involves the capacity to inspire, attract, and influence their subordinates, specifically the teachers and internal staff of the *madrasa*. The goal is to foster collaboration to achieve the *madrasa*'s vision and mission while also persuading external stakeholders, such as the community, that the educational processes and activities are compelling and likely to yield positive student outcomes.

The Role of *Madrasa* Principal

When carrying out their duties and responsibilities, the head of the *madrasa* certainly has specific roles and functions. According to Minister of Religious Affairs Regulation (PMA) number 57 of 2017 regarding *madrasa* principals, it is mandatory for every leader at the *madrasa* level to effectively carry out their leadership functions, including organizational leadership aspects related to improving institutional performance through activities such as strategic planning, curriculum improvement, and co-curricular activity planning (Erwinsyah, Wantu, & Nadjamuddin, 2021). Nggili (2011) asserts that in addition to being a leader in modern management, there is a need for a role as a manager.

The role of the *madrasa* head encompasses various aspects, one of which is serving as an instructional leader. According to Sukandar, the role of a *madrasa* headmaster as an instructional leader differs from the tasks of a school principal as a manager who primarily deals with administrative duties (Sukandar, 2019). The instructional-oriented headmaster is actively involved in determining clear objectives, allocating educational resources, managing the curriculum, monitoring lesson plans, and evaluating teacher performance. It may be concluded that the *madrasa*'s instructional role prioritizes teaching quality as the main objective, which will ultimately strive to realize the vision and mission of the *madrasa*.

Furthermore, Mulyasa (2013) elucidates certain specific roles of *madrasa*, including:

- a. As a manager, I inspire and offer opportunities for instructors and staff to grow their profession and abilities and measure opportunities. Collaborate with education staff to give possibilities for contributive managerial learning.
- b. As an administrator, I care for administrative concerns, including curriculum, people, infrastructure, archives, and finances.
- c. As a supervisor, get the authority to supervise the performance of teaching staff by paying respect to the principle of a consultative relationship, carried out based on the needs of the educational staff and as professional help,
- d. Behave as a leader by offering direction and guidance and providing communication opportunities for teaching staff to assign work.
- e. e. As an innovator, delivering effective techniques to continue forming cooperative ties with the environment, develop new ideas, integrate every activity, provide role

models to all teaching staff in *madrasas*, and develop novel and creative learning models.

Quality of Learning

In other words, quality is the quality of an image or characteristic of a good or service that would provide usability, benefits, and happiness for its users (Abunifa, 2017). Every organization, including educational institutions, has attributes used to maintain and achieve its vision, mission, and goals.

In education, quality will be entrenched in implementing a learning process. Quality learning means that the teaching has quality and can benefit users in reaching a goal. The quality of learning depends on three elements: the principal's leadership model, school culture, and the teaching and learning process. The principal is believed to be the bearer of the highest power to define the direction of the school he leads, including monitoring, guiding, developing, giving performance motivation, driving the organization, and establishing internal and external communication (Hashanah, 2020).

Various aspects influence the quality of learning. The first factor involves welfare training, professional competence, and achievement, and all of these lead to government rules about national education standards (Darwis, Permatasari, & Nurjayadi, 2019; Kunter et al., 2013; Rachman, Sugimaru, & Matsumoto, 2020; Syaifulloh & Pranoto, 2017). The second factor is the necessity to generate competent pupils, life skills, and professional and prosperous teachers (Salim, Azwardi, Ritonga, & Widiastuty, 2021). The third factor is the necessity for evaluation management. Nata (2003) believes that one approach to sustaining the quality of education is by enhancing the evaluation system that ensures the quality of education graduates. It can be done by taking an approach to learning that can build students' potential, especially cognitive potential, emotional appreciation (affective), and practical power (skills and practice) in everyday life (psychomotor).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research aims to identify the challenges, approaches, and leadership considerations faced by *madrasa* administrators to enhance the educational standards amidst the COVID-19 outbreak in *madrasas* located in Central Aceh Regency.

This study is classified as qualitative research. Qualitative research is employed to investigate and comprehensively comprehend a particular phenomenon by examining the experiences and views of research participants (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2012). This study involves conducting field research on currently ongoing phenomena. The resulting data is articulated through words derived from the research subject's arguments, experiences, and behavior. The data of this study were derived from arguments, experiences, and behavior of the head of the *madrasa* and teachers teaching at the *madrasa*, namely MAN 1 Aceh Tengah, MAN 2 Aceh Tengah, MAN 3 Aceh Tengah, and MAS Ar-Rahman.

Data Collection

Data collection is an essential component of research. The absence of gathered data will impede the study process. The data collection methods employed in this research encompassed the interviews, which are employed as the methodology to gather primary data directly from *madrasa* leaders. Interviews are a method of collecting data commonly used in qualitative research. They are designed to get detailed information from a limited number of participants (Moleong, 2000; Sugiyono, 2009). Before interviewing the participants in each *madrasa*, the researcher obtained the recommendation and permission letter from the local authority, in this case, the Religious Affairs Department of Aceh Tengah Regency. This letter of recommendation and permit would officially allow the researcher to conduct the research at each *madrasa*.

Having the legal authority, the researcher also made appointments with the *madrasa*'s head to agree on the interview schedule. Simultaneously, the researcher also prepared a list of questions for the interviews that had been tested and validated. The interviews were done using a semi-structured approach, allowing researchers to ask a range of questions flexibly, with the option to ask follow-up questions based on previous replies (Sugiyono, 2011). Furthermore, the questions posed are open-ended, enabling respondents to freely articulate their emotions and responses, allowing the researchers to gather comprehensive and intricate data (Denscombe, 2010). Researchers assert that interviews are adequate for uncovering the challenges and strategies made by *madrasa* chiefs to enhance the educational standards of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data Analysis

The data obtained is given in words, as described in the research mentioned earlier design. This study falls under the category of descriptive analysis, which aims to present a comprehensive summary of information obtained from respondents' opinions and statements. Conclusions are then drawn and presented as explanatory, organized by specific topics and categories (Sudarto, 1995; Merriam, 2009; Bryman, 2016).

Researchers conducted many steps during the fieldwork as part of the data processing process. The data collected must be reliable and verifiable by following the correct protocols and procedures. The stages encompass (Noor, 2017):

1. Data reduction involves organizing raw data into abstract representations derived from field data.
2. The data will be organized and processed to align with the research aims to identify the issues, strategies (policies), and consequences of the *madrasa* head's leadership to enhance the quality of education in *madrasas* during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Data interpretation involves organizing data items to derive meaning based on the researcher's perspective to address study objectives and reach conclusions.
4. Data verification confirms whether the derived data aligns with the research objectives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The Condition Of *Madrasa* At The Onset Of The COVID-19 Pandemic

Before discussing the research findings related to the research problem formulation in this study, the researcher had the opportunity to inquire about the condition of the

madrasa when the Circular Letter regarding the mass closure of schools in Indonesia was issued.

Generally, all four *madraras* implement distance learning policies or procedures by the government's Circular Letter. One of the points is the utilization of remote learning material or e-learning. Furthermore, nearly all students in the four *madraras* utilize smartphones to access remote learning.

Based on the interview with the Deputy Head of Curriculum at MAN 1 Aceh Tengah, it is acknowledged that: "Undoubtedly, we felt surprised and overwhelmed. Despite the government, specifically the Ministry of Religious Affairs, eventually facilitating schools with several remote learning application media (e-learning), we still feel unaccustomed and find it less effective.

Ibu Salwa also added that there are advantages and disadvantages to using media or e-learning applications. The facilitated media e-learning includes several features teachers may utilize, such as attendance tracking, material upload (PDF and video), and live online classes, where teachers can interact with students virtually.

One advantage is that with the application, teachers may assess the student's level of engagement in participating in the online learning process. However, only some of that can be considered as a proposal. An observed drawback is that teachers have seen a need for more enthusiasm among students in participating in remote learning processes.

Ibu Salwa added: "Before implementing online learning, we invited (notified) the parents of the students to inform them that face-to-face learning at the *madrasa* was canceled and fully conducted from home." We also urge all teachers in the MAN 1 Aceh Tengah community to continuously refresh themselves regarding using the e-learning resources mentioned before to ensure optimal implementation.

Meanwhile, the Head of MAN 2 Aceh Tengah, Mr. Ihsan Fahri, acknowledges that the *madrasa* was taken aback when the directive to conduct remote learning was issued. "Initially, upon receiving the announcement, we were taken aback, and when schooling was conducted remotely, the learning process was completely ineffective. For nearly 2 months, remote learning did not progress". This is because we have yet to be able to convince the readiness of teachers and students to carry out distance learning.

It may be inferred that the head of the *madrasa* in this study reacted with a sense of shock to the pandemic regarding implementing learning in the *madrasa*, a condition they had never experienced before. Regarding policy implementation, all four *madraras* still adhere to the recommendations and directives from both the central and provincial governments. No decisive and especially contributing policy was taken due to limited information and limited human resources owned by the *madrasa*.

Challenges Faced by the *Madrasa* Principal During COVID-19 Pandemic

Respondents acknowledged encountering numerous issues and challenges in their efforts to maintain and enhance the quality of education in *madraras* throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the major obstacles is the need for more internet networks in some regions of Central Aceh, making it difficult for students to participate actively in distance learning.

Ibu Salwa, the head of the curriculum at MAN 1, acknowledged that the learning process could be more effective due to students needing access to adequate internet

network quality. At MAN 2, the challenge faced is the need for more readiness of teachers and students to participate in distance learning due to a significant number of students who do not even have smartphones. Teachers' lack of preparedness refers to the insufficient effort in developing competencies and skills, ranging from classroom management and media utilization to interactive abilities during online learning implementation. Ziaulhaq asserted that online learning requires teachers to be more communicative towards students and capable of initiating interactive activities (Ziaulhaq, 2022).

The head of MAN 2 adds another constraint, namely the difficulty in monitoring and evaluating the implementation of students' tasks from home. Furthermore, parents need a strong impetus to monitor and instruct their children to participate in distance learning classes. Oleh karena itu, proses pembelajaran jarak jauh ini dianggap remeh. Understandably, most parents and guardians of MAN 2 Aceh Tengah students come from lower-middle-class families. Orang tua dan wali siswa harus menjalankan pekerjaan mereka tanpa mengawasi anak-anak mereka saat belajar di rumah. Despite knowing the assigned task, the student did not do it through the WhatsApp group.

Undoubtedly, one of the drawbacks of distance learning is the ineffectiveness of the evaluation and monitoring process. Therefore, a study conducted by Permatasari on academic supervision of online learning during the pandemic at MAN 1 Muara Enim suggests that the head of MAN 1 Muara Enim should establish a supervision team to implement online academic supervision by ensuring two components: verification of lesson plans, synchronization of online learning materials, and secondly, collecting reports on teaching and learning activities along with supporting evidence (Permatasari et al., 2022).

The Strategies And Policies The Head Of The *Madrasa* Implemented During The COVID-19 Pandemic

To consistently maintain the quality of distance learning during the pandemic, several *madrasa* heads have implemented various policies and strategies. All four *madrasas* employ a similar approach, which involves having class teachers on standby at the *madrasa* to distribute printed materials and collect assignments from students who do not have internet access.

Curriculum Coordinator (Waka Kurikulum) at MAN 1 Aceh Tengah:

"Due to the limited internet access for some students, we advise Class Guardians to print out the learning materials and instruct students (who cannot access the materials online) to collect them from the school while adhering to the Health protocols." Similarly, the assignment collection process will also involve submitting the tasks directly to the teacher class at the madrasa."

The curriculum coordinator of MAN 1 also acknowledged that the *madrasa* does not have a specific program or policy to address learning issues. However, MAN 1 Aceh Tengah has reported several shortcomings to the e-learning facilitator, including network disruptions (server) and frequent errors.

Therefore, MAN 1 agreed to employ a WhatsApp Group (WA Group). Initially, the WhatsApp group was solely utilized by teachers to convey information and reminders to

students regarding attending online classes and submitting assignments. However, due to frequent disruptions in the e-learning platform, the teachers utilized the WhatsApp group to share materials and collect assignments. Additionally, WA is more accessible to students, even if they reside in areas with weak internet connectivity.

Meanwhile, at MAN 2, the Head of the *Madrasa* took the initiative to collaborate with a selected internet provider to provide free data quotas to students, enabling them to access materials and submit assignments online. Moreover, MAN 2, which had previously collaborated with an educational start-up, Ruangguru, intends to continue the partnership. However, due to the low enthusiasm of students towards distance learning and the high cost involved, MAN 2 has decided to cancel the collaboration.

However, the situation is different at MAN 3 Aceh Tengah. The Head of MAN 3 Aceh Tengah, Mr. Abu Mumin, has implemented a shift system, which means that students will have alternating face-to-face learning time with other students at the *madrasa*. Of course, this shift activity also adheres to health protocols.

In contrast to other *madrasas*, MAS Ar-Rahman does not implement online or distance learning. MAS Ar-Rahman is a private school that implements a boarding school system. The number of students and study groups (classes) is also small. There were only three classes, namely X, XI, and XII, and on average, each class was filled by 10 students. Most students at MAS Ar-Rahman come from outside Aceh Tengah Regency, mostly from Bener Meriah and Gayo Lues Regencies.

Implications for the Leadership of the *Madrasa* Principal

Based on the interview results, there are several implications for the leadership of the *madrasa* head in efforts to maintain and improve the quality of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

One implication is the questioning of the role of the *madrasa* head in enhancing their competence in decision-making, providing innovation and creative ideas, and being vigilant about *madrasa* risk management during a pandemic or other emergencies. As suggested by Kaul, Shah, and El-Serag in their research, there are six core leadership qualities of *madrasa* principals during the COVID-19 pandemic, including communication, decision-making, humanism, innovation, realism, and core values (Kaul, Shah, & El-Serag, 2020). Furthermore, Hasanah suggested improving the quality of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic with steps, and school principals are expected to use many principles proposed by Mulyasa (2012), including:

- a. Fun and interesting activities initiated by the *madrasa* principal would improve the working motivation of staff and teachers;
- b. The head of the *madrasa* must be able to formulate and design executed during the pandemic and involve many teachers in realizing the objectives;
- c. Teachers and staff need to be informed about their performances, and the principal should give the reward;
- d. The school principal can implement a reward approach. As a leader, the school principal must be sensitive to fulfilling teachers' and educators' physical, spiritual, and competency needs (Hasanah, 2020).

Furthermore, this study also implies the need for strategic management to sustain the existence of schools that can maintain and enhance the quality of learning during

emergencies, such as a pandemic. The research conducted by Majir concluded that amidst the pandemic, preserving schools' existence is crucial to maintaining the quality of education in schools (Majir, Anwar, Habibi, & Prasetyo, 2022). The recommended strategic management includes (1) Identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the *madrasa*, (2) Promoting the school through collaborations with communities, organizations, and companies, and (3) Establishing good internal relationships with teachers, staff, and students.

Furthermore, the experiences of the *madrasa* will also have implications for the role of the *madrasa* head in terms of the readiness of the *madrasa* to adapt to the new curriculum system, such as the Merdeka Curriculum, which would involve several blended learning activities. Therefore, the head of the *madrasa* must inevitably update their perspective and managerial approach from traditional or conventional to digital or technology-based (AlAjmi, 2022). The International Society for Technology in Education has formulated five fundamental components of digital leadership, namely:

- a. Excellent Professional Practices, referring to the efforts made by *madrasa principals* to promote innovatively and professional learning conditions through the utilization of ICT;
- b. Visionary Leadership focuses on the combination of clear vision made by the *madrasa* principal. A visionary *madrasa* head will shape digital leadership character;
- c. Digital Era Learning Culture, requiring the *madrasa* principal to be capable of creating and facilitating a learning culture that is integrated with digital values for both teachers and students;
- d. Digital Citizenship, demanding that the *madrasa* principal also serves as an example of the digital culture embedded in their social life;
- e. Lastly, The Systemic Improvement expects that the *madrasa* principal, as a leader, will be able to identify the *madrasa's* weaknesses in digital learning and demonstrate efforts to enhance digital competence. In addition, systemic improvements also have implications for achieving gains to enhance the high standards of efficiency maintained in leadership processes, both in the short and long term (ISTE, 2014).

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and analysis, the researchers drew many conclusions. Initially, the *madrasas* in Central Aceh Regency were in an unexpected condition when the COVID-19 epidemic emerged and was officially declared a global pandemic. *Madrasa* leaders function as administrators who solely rely on guidance and directives from the central, provincial, and regional authorities for school closures and the implementation of remote learning. During the initial months, there is a lack of effort or systematic approach in decision-making. Shortly after receiving instructions, the head of the *madrasa* in Central Aceh Regency initiated various measures to uphold the educational standards of the institution.

Moreover, most *madrasas* in Central Aceh Regency encounter a common challenge: the lack of readiness among teachers and students to carry out remote learning effectively. The teachers' lack of preparedness is evident in their limited utilization of electronic media to facilitate online learning, both in terms of their proficiency and ability

to meet the requirements. The primary challenge faced by students is the restricted availability of internet connectivity. Additional issues encompass the lack of complete oversight and monitoring by *madrasa* administrators over teachers and students, resulting in the ineffectiveness of distant learning implementation.

Furthermore, amidst the pandemic, the head of the *madrasa* in this study implemented multiple initiatives or tactics to ensure the continuity of the learning process. *Madrasas* in Central Aceh Regency have not yet fully utilized the e-learning media platforms proposed by the Ministry of Religion and Education and Culture. One possible answer is to utilize WhatsApp Groups as a means of communication and as a platform for sharing educational materials and assignments among students. In addition, several *madrasas* implement staggered schedules, whereby students are allocated specific lesson periods to adhere to social separation measures. *Madrasa* heads have undertaken multiple endeavors to provide teacher competency development programs for adopting distance learning throughout the epidemic. However, the outcomes have not yet reached their full potential.

These research findings contributed to several spheres. First, teachers' learning and teaching experiences and managerial issues a head at *madrasas* faces could be expressed as a foundation of certain teaching and managerial procedures at school during emergencies, for instance, during the outbreak of fatal diseases. Therefore, the local authorities, in this case, local education authorities (*Dinas Pendidikan*) and the Religious Affairs Department at Aceh Tengah regency, could establish and legalize one regulation for schools related to the learning process amid the difficult and emergency situation.

The findings of this study did not only share the contribution but also some implications. First, the issues related to the facility's readiness during the pandemic should be improved in the future. The elevated facilities should also be balanced with teachers' capacity and competencies in utilizing some learning platforms that are accessible during the emergency. Secondly, the leadership of the head of *madrasas* should also be emphasized and strengthened because, in this difficult situation, the role of the *madrasa* becomes crucial in uniting teachers' and students' aspirations and needs. In realizing this, the heads of *madrasas* should participate in several leadership seminars and workshops mediated by the local authorities.

Even so, this research was limited to gathering the data. This study only studied *madrasa Aliyah* in Aceh Tengah regency. Further information should also be obtained from *Madrasa Ibtidaiyah* and *Madrasa Tsanawiyah* and, necessarily, from the local authorities related to the learning policy undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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