



Metaphorical Leadership of a Muballigh in Establishing an Islamic School in A Marginal Rural Area: An Interpretive Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the metaphorical leadership of a muballigh (Islamic preacher) in establishing and leading an Integrated Islamic Primary School (Sekolah Dasar Islam Terpadu, SD IT) in a marginal rural area of Eastern Lombok, Indonesia. Drawing on interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the research explores how Islamic leadership metaphors, khalifah (vicegerent), ra'in (shepherd), qudwah (moral exemplar), and imam (spiritual leader), function as cognitive and moral frameworks guiding educational leadership in contexts of infrastructural scarcity and social marginality. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis involving school founders, teachers, community leaders, and parents. The findings reveal that leadership is experienced as a spiritual calling rooted in dakwah, enacted through pastoral service and moral exemplarity, and sustained by collective action and religious coping. The ra'in metaphor emerged as the most salient in daily practice, emphasizing care for vulnerable learners and inclusive education. This study contributes to Islamic educational leadership theory by demonstrating how metaphor-based leadership integrates spiritual accountability, community collaboration, and character education, offering an alternative to dominant managerial paradigms in marginal education settings.

Keywords: Islamic educational leadership; metaphorical leadership; muballigh; interpretive phenomenology; marginal rural education



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Article History: Received: (February 5, 2026), Revised: (February 13, 2026), Accepted: (February 15, 2026), Published: (February 18, 2026)

INTRODUCTION

Education in marginal rural areas of Indonesia continues to face persistent structural and systemic challenges that hinder equitable access to quality education. Empirical evidence indicates that schools in remote regions are constrained by geographical isolation, long travel distances, limited transportation infrastructure, and inadequate educational facilities (Abduh et al., 2022). These barriers significantly affect school attendance, learning continuity, and educational outcomes. The situation is further exacerbated by unequal teacher distribution, as most qualified educators prefer to

work in urban centers rather than in remote and disadvantaged areas. Consequently, educational disparities remain pronounced, particularly in regions classified as underdeveloped, frontier, and outermost (3T) areas (Wijayati, 2025). Within this context, leadership emerges as a decisive factor in mitigating educational inequality and sustaining educational initiatives in marginal settings.

Contemporary educational leadership faces increasing pressure to adapt to rapid social, technological, and organizational change. The dynamics of the Fourth Industrial Revolution characterized by automation, digitalization, and accelerated information flows have transformed the governance and management of educational institutions, including those in rural and marginalized contexts (Asmadi, 2021). Educational leadership is no longer limited to administrative control but is increasingly understood as the capacity to influence, mobilize, and inspire individuals and organizations through trust, collaboration, and shared commitment toward collective goals (Hayati et al., 2023). In Islamic educational contexts, transformational leadership is particularly relevant, as it emphasizes inspiring followers to internalize organizational vision, encouraging innovative problem-solving, and developing human capacity through sustained guidance and support (Harsoyo, 2022). However, dominant leadership theories remain largely grounded in Western managerial paradigms and often fail to capture culturally and religiously embedded leadership practices operating in non-Western, marginalized settings.

Within Muslim communities, *muballigh* frequently assume leadership roles that extend beyond religious instruction to encompass social transformation and educational development. *Da'wah* is not merely a ritual or communicative activity but a socially embedded process aimed at guiding individuals and communities toward moral, spiritual, and social betterment. Effective *da'wah* practice requires contextual sensitivity and responsiveness to local social realities (Nashir, 2025). Studies on *muballigh* competencies highlight the importance of comprehensive religious knowledge, including mastery of the Qur'an, Hadith, Hadith exegesis, Islamic history, and adaptive communication skills (Chairawati, 2016). Leaders who possess these competencies gain moral legitimacy through their commitment to justice, compassion, trustworthiness, and social responsibility, while actively promoting virtuous conduct and preventing moral deviation (Dianto, 2019). Such characteristics generate leadership patterns that are simultaneously charismatic and transformational, particularly within community-based educational initiatives.

Despite the growing recognition of *muballigh* involvement in education, existing research has largely focused on normative descriptions of religious leadership or institutional management, with limited attention to the symbolic and cognitive frameworks through which *muballigh* conceptualize and enact leadership. Metaphor theory offers a powerful analytical lens for addressing this gap. Metaphors function not merely as rhetorical devices but as cognitive structures that shape how individuals understand roles, responsibilities, and moral obligations (Rahayu, 2018). In Indonesian society, leadership metaphors embedded in proverbs and social practices reflect culturally constructed ideals of authority, care, and moral responsibility. As such, metaphorical analysis is particularly relevant for examining *muballigh*

leadership, which is deeply rooted in religious symbolism and local cultural meaning systems (Rahayu, 2018). However, empirical studies applying metaphor analysis to Islamic educational leadership especially in marginal rural contexts remain scarce.

Integrated Islamic Schools (*Sekolah Islam Terpadu*, SIT) provide a critical institutional context for examining *muballigh* leadership in education. SIT represents a holistic educational model that integrates the national curriculum with Islamic values in a systematic and comprehensive manner. This model emerged from the initiatives of campus-based *da'wah* activists affiliated with leading Indonesian universities, such as the Bandung Institute of Technology and the University of Indonesia, as a response to perceived dichotomies between religious and secular education (Suyatno, 2014). The SIT curriculum emphasizes tiered learning outcomes aimed at developing ten core Muslim personality traits through an integrative, productive, creative, and innovative school culture grounded in *qudwah hasanah*, cooperation, and *ukhuwah* (Khairudin & Susiwi, 2013). While SIT has expanded rapidly across Indonesia, research has predominantly focused on curriculum design and institutional growth, with limited exploration of leadership practices at the grassroots level, particularly in marginal rural settings.

Understanding leadership in such contexts requires methodological approaches capable of capturing subjective experience and meaning-making processes. Phenomenology is particularly well suited to this purpose, as it emphasizes that knowledge emerges from conscious human experience and prioritizes the interpretation of lived experience as the foundation of meaning (Nasir et al., 2023). Phenomenological inquiry seeks to understand how individuals perceive, interpret, and assign meaning to their experiences within specific social, cultural, and historical contexts (Nuryana et al., 2019). By focusing on lived experience, phenomenology enables researchers to explore leadership as it is experienced and enacted by *muballigh* actors themselves, rather than imposing externally derived theoretical constructs (Winardi, 2025). This approach is especially relevant for examining leadership practices grounded in religious belief, moral obligation, and cultural symbolism.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the metaphorical leadership of a *muballigh* in establishing and developing an Integrated Islamic Primary School in a marginal rural area. SD IT Ruhul Quro Pengadangan, established in 2021 in Selak Aik, Bawak Paok Hamlet, Pengadangan Village, Pringgasela District, East Lombok, represents a unique case in which a *muballigh* serves as a pioneer in providing access to quality education in a geographically and socioeconomically disadvantaged context. The establishment of this school reflects a concrete manifestation of transformational educational leadership that integrates the national curriculum with a pesantren-based curriculum, guided by a vision of producing graduates with sound Islamic understanding grounded in the teachings of the Prophet's companions. Through *da'wah*-based activities such as community outreach, contextual counseling, and persuasive engagement, the *muballigh* has contributed to strengthening educational awareness and participation within the local community (Purnomo et al., 2021).

By employing a phenomenological approach and metaphor analysis, this study aims to contribute theoretically to Islamic educational leadership by illuminating how religious metaphors function as cognitive and moral frameworks guiding leadership practice in marginal contexts. Practically, the findings are expected to offer insights for educators, religious leaders, and policymakers seeking to develop contextual, culturally grounded, and sustainable leadership models capable of addressing educational inequality in rural and disadvantaged regions.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Educational Leadership: From Classical to Contextual Perspectives

Leadership has long been recognized as a central determinant of organizational effectiveness, particularly in educational institutions. Classical leadership scholars conceptualize leadership as the ability to mobilize people toward extraordinary achievements through shared vision, commitment, and moral influence (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Daft, 2021; Northouse, 2021). In educational contexts, leadership extends beyond administrative authority to include pedagogical direction, value formation, and institutional sustainability (Hayati et al., 2023; Wahjosumidjo, 2017). These perspectives emphasize that leadership is inherently relational and value-laden, requiring credibility, trust, and ethical consistency.

Within Islamic educational discourse, leadership is framed not merely as managerial competence but as a moral and spiritual responsibility (*amanah*). Scholars of Islamic educational leadership argue that leaders must integrate professional expertise with ethical and theological commitments, grounded in Islamic values such as justice, compassion, service, and accountability before God (Burhanuddin, 2017; Syafar, 2017; Hafidhuddin, 2019). This view aligns leadership with prophetic ethics (*rahmatan lil 'alamin*), positioning leaders as moral exemplars who guide institutions toward holistic educational goals (Tafsir, 2018; Al-Banna, 2018).

Transformational, Servant, and Sustainable Leadership

Among contemporary leadership models, transformational leadership has gained prominence due to its emphasis on vision, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Avolio & Bass, 2020). Transformational leaders motivate followers to transcend personal interests for collective and moral purposes, making this model particularly relevant to educational and religious institutions (Harsoyo, 2022; Siti Wahyuni & Maunah, 2021; Fadilah, 2021). In Islamic educational settings, transformational leadership is often interpreted through prophetic leadership principles, emphasizing moral transformation alongside organizational change (Alwi Dahlan, 2020).

Complementing transformational leadership, servant leadership foregrounds service, humility, and ethical stewardship, positioning leaders as caretakers of human potential rather than controllers of authority (Greenleaf, 1977; Tasmara, 2006). Similarly, adaptive and sustainable leadership frameworks stress resilience, ethical

endurance, and long-term institutional viability in complex and uncertain environments (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011). These approaches resonate strongly with leadership practices in marginal contexts, where leaders must navigate scarcity, social vulnerability, and institutional fragility.

Islamic Leadership, Dakwah, and Muballigh Competence

Islamic leadership theory is deeply rooted in Qur'anic and prophetic foundations, particularly the concept of humans as *khalifah* (vicegerents) entrusted with responsibility on earth (Qur'an, Al-Baqarah 2:30). Leadership in Islam is therefore inseparable from ethical conduct, collective welfare, and accountability (Al-Attas, 2017; Al-Faruqi, 2016; Alatas, 2018). Hadith literature further emphasizes leadership as guardianship (*ra'in*), reinforcing the obligation to care for and guide communities responsibly (Abu Dawud, 1999; Samsul Nizar & Hasibuan, 2020).

In contemporary society, *muballigh* increasingly function as hybrid leaders who integrate religious authority with social, educational, and communicative roles. Research on *muballigh* competence highlights the importance of theological mastery, contextual sensitivity, digital literacy, and interdisciplinary engagement in dakwah practice (Abdul Rahman, 2019; Ahmad Mubarak, 2021; Moh. Ali Aziz, 2020). Professional dakwah management further requires strategic planning, ethical communication, and responsiveness to pluralistic social realities (Wahyu Ilaihi, 2019; Asep Muhyiddin, 2018; Aam Mualifah, 2014). These competencies position *muballigh* as key actors in educational leadership, particularly in communities where religious legitimacy strongly influences social trust.

Metaphor Theory and Leadership Meaning-Making

Leadership studies have increasingly turned to metaphor theory to uncover the symbolic and cognitive dimensions of leadership. Metaphors are not merely linguistic ornaments but fundamental structures through which individuals conceptualize complex social phenomena (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). In organizational studies, metaphors shape how leaders understand organizations, power relations, and human behavior (Morgan, 2006; Grant & Osrick, 1996). Critical leadership scholars further argue that metaphors reveal hidden assumptions and ideological dimensions embedded within leadership discourse (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012).

Within culturally embedded contexts, metaphors derive from shared traditions, religious narratives, and local wisdom. Studies on leadership metaphors in Indonesian culture demonstrate how proverbs and symbolic language encode expectations regarding authority, responsibility, and moral conduct (Rahayu, 2018). In Islamic contexts, leadership metaphors such as *khalifah*, *imam*, *ra'in*, and *qudwah hasanah* function as moral-cognitive frameworks guiding leadership practice (Munir, 2017). Despite their conceptual richness, empirical applications of metaphor analysis in Islamic educational leadership particularly in marginal rural settings—remain limited.

Integrated Islamic Schools and Leadership Context

Integrated Islamic Schools (*Sekolah Islam Terpadu*, SIT) provide a distinctive institutional context for examining Islamic educational leadership. SIT emerged as an alternative educational model that integrates national curriculum standards with Islamic values and character education (Suyatno, 2013; Barizi, 2020). The development of SIT has been supported by networks such as JSIT, which play a strategic role in curriculum development, leadership training, and institutional coordination (Nawa et al., 2022). Research indicates that SIT emphasizes holistic education, combining academic excellence, moral formation, and community engagement (Muhaimin, 2019; Lubis, 2018).

However, most studies on SIT focus on curriculum design, institutional growth, or policy dimensions, with limited attention to leadership practices at the grassroots level, particularly in marginal rural contexts. Leadership in such settings often relies more on moral authority, religious legitimacy, and community trust than formal administrative structures.

Conceptual Framework

Drawing on the reviewed literature, this study proposes a conceptual framework that integrates four core constructs: (1) metaphorical leadership, (2) Islamic leadership values, (3) *muballigh* competence and dakwah practice, and (4) marginal rural educational context. Metaphorical leadership represents the cognitive-symbolic lens through which the *muballigh* interprets leadership roles and responsibilities. Islamic leadership values provide the ethical and theological foundation guiding leadership intentions and actions. *Muballigh* competence mediates leadership practice through religious knowledge, communication skills, and contextual engagement. The marginal rural context shapes leadership enactment through structural constraints and community needs.

A phenomenological approach is employed to explore how these constructs are experienced and integrated by the *muballigh* in establishing and sustaining an Integrated Islamic School. This framework positions leadership not as a fixed set of behaviors but as a dynamic meaning-making process shaped by religious metaphors, lived experience, and contextual realities.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Approach

This study employs a qualitative research design using an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of *muballigh* in leading and developing an Integrated Islamic School (*Sekolah Islam Terpadu*). Phenomenology is concerned with understanding the essence of human experience as it is consciously perceived, with the aim of revealing the meanings embedded in those experiences. Interpretative phenomenology, originally developed by Husserl and later expanded

by Heidegger and Gadamer, emphasizes *verstehen*, the process of understanding phenomena through hermeneutic interpretation by examining how individuals construct meaning from their experiences within specific social, cultural, and religious contexts.

The selection of interpretative phenomenology is methodologically aligned with the objectives of this study for several reasons. First, phenomenology allows the researcher to apply *epoché* and *bracketing*, suspending preconceived theoretical assumptions and personal biases in order to understand leadership phenomena from the participants' own perspectives. Second, this approach is particularly suitable for exploring symbolic and meaning-laden dimensions of leadership, including the use of Islamic leadership metaphors such as *khalifah*, *ra'in*, *qudwah*, and *imam*. Phenomenology emphasizes intentionality how consciousness is always directed toward meaning – making it an appropriate framework for examining how *muballigh* conceptualize, interpret, and enact leadership through metaphorical understanding. Third, the interpretative dimension of phenomenology enables the researcher to situate leadership experiences within their broader socio-cultural and religious contexts, which is essential for understanding leadership practices in Islamic educational settings. Through this approach, the study aims to generate rich phenomenological descriptions of *muballigh* leadership that can inform the development of a contextual and metaphor-based Islamic leadership model for Integrated Islamic Schools in Indonesia.

Research Context and Participants

The research was conducted at SD IT Ruhul Quro Pengadangan, located in Selak Aik, Bawak Paok Hamlet, Pengadangan Village, Pringgasela District, East Lombok Regency, West Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia. This school was selected based on several strategic considerations. First, SD IT Ruhul Quro was founded and is led directly by local *muballigh* who possess extensive experience in Islamic preaching (*dakwah*) and Islamic education within a rural context. Second, the school is situated in a marginal area characterized by challenging geographical conditions, limited transportation access, and developing educational infrastructure. Third, the socio-cultural context of the Sasak Muslim community, which strongly upholds Islamic traditions, provides a rich setting for examining how Islamic leadership metaphors are enacted in educational practice. The research site is representative of Integrated Islamic School development in peripheral regions that face distinctive challenges related to resources, accessibility, and community expectations for quality education grounded in Islamic values.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure information-rich cases relevant to the research objectives. The study involved key informants consisting of *muballigh* pioneers of the school (two to three individuals), the school principal and management staff (two individuals), and foundation administrators (two to three individuals). Supporting informants included teachers and educational staff (three to four individuals), community leaders (two to three individuals), and parents of students (three to four individuals). Inclusion criteria required participants to have direct involvement with the school and sufficient experience interacting with the

muballigh leadership. Ethical considerations were addressed through informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the use of pseudonyms to protect participant identities.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected over a six-month period from March to August 2025, following phases aligned with the school's academic calendar. The first phase focused on research preparation, institutional permission, and preliminary observation to establish rapport and contextual understanding. The second phase involved intensive data collection, while the final phase was dedicated to data triangulation, member checking, and preliminary analysis.

In-depth interviews served as the primary data collection method. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted to explore the lived experiences of *muballigh* in leading the Integrated Islamic School. This format allowed flexibility while maintaining alignment with the research focus. Interview guides were developed based on the study's conceptual framework, covering leadership metaphors, leadership practices in the SIT context, strategic decision-making, challenges in marginal settings, and reflective meaning-making. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, was audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented with field notes capturing non-verbal cues and contextual details.

Participant observation was employed as a complementary method to capture leadership practices in natural settings. Observations were conducted during school meetings, classroom activities, religious events, community interactions, and extracurricular programs. A naturalistic observation approach was adopted to minimize disruption while allowing the researcher to observe leadership behaviors, interactions, and symbolic practices. Observational data were documented using descriptive-reflective field notes, with particular attention to metaphorical language, decision-making processes, conflict management, and the enactment of Islamic values in everyday school life.

Document analysis was conducted to enrich contextual understanding and triangulate findings. Documents analyzed included the school's founding proposal, vision and mission statements, curriculum structures, internal reports, official correspondence, and school publications. Content analysis was applied to identify leadership themes, values, and metaphors embedded within these documents.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis followed a phenomenological analytic framework adapted for leadership research. The process began with repeated reading of interview transcripts to achieve holistic familiarization. Meaning units were then identified through line-by-line coding, focusing on statements related to leadership experience, metaphor usage, and value orientation. These meaning units were subsequently transformed into academic language while preserving participants' original meanings.

The analysis proceeded through four systematic stages: (1) familiarization with the data to gain an overall sense of the experience; (2) identification of significant meaning units using constant comparative techniques; (3) transformation of meaning units into phenomenologically sensitive academic expressions; and (4) synthesis of essential descriptions through the integration of invariant constituents into textural and structural descriptions of leadership experience. NVivo 14 software was utilized to support data organization, coding, and theme development.

Trustworthiness, Validity, and Reliability

The rigor of this phenomenological study was ensured through the application of trustworthiness criteria adapted from Lincoln and Guba. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement, methodological and source triangulation, and member checking, whereby participants reviewed interview transcripts and preliminary interpretations. Transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and leadership practices, enabling readers to assess applicability to similar settings.

Dependability was supported through the maintenance of a comprehensive audit trail documenting all research procedures, analytic decisions, and methodological adjustments. Peer debriefing with scholars experienced in phenomenology and Islamic educational leadership was conducted to enhance analytic rigor. Confirmability was ensured through reflexive journaling, consistent application of *bracketing*, and systematic documentation of data to minimize researcher bias and ensure that findings emerged from participant experiences rather than researcher assumptions.

RESULTS / FINDINGS

This section presents the empirical findings of the study derived from in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the findings reflect how *muballigh* experience, interpret, and enact leadership through Islamic metaphors in the process of establishing and developing an Integrated Islamic School in a marginal rural context. The analysis generated a set of interrelated experiential themes, each comprising several interrelated subthemes. These themes represent shared patterns of meaning across participants while preserving the idiographic depth of individual experiences.

Participant Characteristics and Research Context

The study involved participants who were directly engaged with the establishment and daily operation of SD IT Ruhul Quro Pengadangan. Participants included *muballigh* founders, school leaders, foundation administrators, teachers, community figures, and parents. This diversity enabled triangulation of perspectives regarding leadership practices and their perceived impact on the school and community.

Table 1. Participant characteristics and study context

Variable	Description
Research setting	Integrated Islamic Primary School (SD IT)
Location	Marginal rural area, East Lombok, Indonesia
Key participants	Muballigh founders (3), school leaders (2), foundation administrators (3)
Supporting participants	Teachers (4), community leaders (3), parents (4)
Total participants	19 participants
Data sources	In-depth interviews, participant observation, document analysis
Study duration	Six months

Source: Author's fieldwork (2025)

Muballigh's Lived Experience in Establishing SD IT Ruhul Quro in a Marginal Rural Area

The findings reveal that the *muballigh's* lived experience in establishing SD IT Ruhul Quro Pengadangan emerged from the intersection of a critical historical moment (the COVID-19 pandemic), limited educational access in Selak Aik, and strong community demands. The idea to establish the school did not arise from isolated individual initiative, but rather from collective awareness of structural educational deprivation. The *muballigh's* long-standing engagement in *dakwah* activities shaped a deep moral sensitivity toward the educational and spiritual needs of marginalized children.

Severe constraints such as the absence of nearby schools, long travel distances, and shortages of qualified teachers—were experienced as moral tensions between the Islamic ideal of equitable education and the reality of rural marginalization. These conditions were internalized as a religious responsibility requiring concrete action. The early phase of school establishment involved intensive community deliberation (*musyawarah*), emphasizing collective legitimacy over individual authority. Leadership was thus enacted through participatory decision-making, beginning with site selection and followed by the gradual organization of facilities, student recruitment, and teacher mobilization under conditions of minimal infrastructure.

The most significant challenges included the lack of adequate learning spaces and poor transportation access. These constraints were addressed through strong community solidarity, particularly collective road construction and voluntary contributions. Such experiences transformed leadership understanding from individual heroism to community empowerment. Spiritually, the *muballigh* responded to overwhelming challenges through *tawakkul* (trust in God), which functioned as a psychological anchor sustaining resilience. Unexpected bureaucratic ease during licensing processes was interpreted as divine facilitation, reinforcing spiritual conviction in the educational mission.

The most meaningful leadership experience reported was witnessing students' ability to read and memorize the Qur'an. Success was thus defined primarily in terms of students' spiritual and intellectual transformation rather than institutional growth. Feelings of regret related to delayed social contribution further reflected strong moral consciousness and a sense of life calling. Leadership experiences also fostered inclusive educational commitment, particularly toward students who learned more slowly, reinforcing pedagogical empathy and perseverance.

Leadership Metaphors Guiding Muballigh Educational Leadership

The findings indicate that leadership practice was guided by an integrated system of Islamic metaphors *khalifah* (vicegerent), *ra'in* (shepherd), *qudwah* (moral exemplar), and *imam* (spiritual guide). The *khalifah* metaphor framed leadership as dual accountability to God and society, shaping ethical decision-making beyond administrative effectiveness. Leadership satisfaction was derived from fulfilling trust (*amanah*) rather than exercising authority.

The *ra'in* metaphor emerged as the most dominant in daily practice, positioning students as the primary responsibility of leadership. Leadership was understood fundamentally as service, reversing conventional hierarchical relations and emphasizing care, protection, and guidance. Moral protection—safeguarding students from ethical degradation was considered as important as academic instruction. Authentic leadership as *ra'in* was experienced through heart-centered guidance, where affective connection outweighed formal authority.

The *qudwah* metaphor emphasized holistic role modeling through consistency between values, speech, and behavior. Moral excellence (*akhlak al-karimah*) was prioritized over technical competence. Leadership consistency was cultivated through deliberate self-discipline, value clarity, and incremental behavioral practice. Feelings of leadership failure, when expectations were unmet, became opportunities for self-reflection rather than disengagement.

The *imam* metaphor extended beyond ritual leadership to represent spiritual integrity integrating belief, speech, and action. Leadership innovation focused on strengthening relational networks among teachers, parents, and the community. Honesty and justice were identified as foundational principles sustaining spiritual authority. The *muballigh* emphasized that these metaphors function synergistically: *khalifah* provides theological grounding, *ra'in* offers pastoral orientation, *qudwah* sets behavioral standards, and *imam* directs spiritual coherence. Without metaphors, leadership was perceived as purely instrumental and deprived of symbolic and spiritual depth.

Meanings and Values Embedded in Muballigh Leadership Experience

The deepest meaning of educational leadership for the *muballigh* was defined as the ability to inspire, motivate, and empower all stakeholders. Leadership meaning was inseparable from the Islamic educational goal of holistic character formation (*tarbiyah*), with student moral development prioritized over institutional expansion. Integrity,

empathy, and clear communication emerged as the highest leadership values, reflecting the primacy of moral character, relational sensitivity, and coordination.

Leadership commitment entailed personal sacrifices, particularly reduced time and resources for family, yet these sacrifices were experienced positively as shared moral contributions. Gratitude, openness, and enhanced understanding of human relationships were identified as the most significant personal learning outcomes. Leadership was perceived as a collaborative endeavor, with educational quality achievable only through collective action.

The desired legacy was articulated as producing students of noble character, reflecting an eschatological understanding of education as *sadaqah jariyah*. Time consciousness, proactive action, and starting from small-scale initiatives were emphasized as core leadership lessons. Inclusive commitment toward slower learners reflected a strong justice-oriented educational ethos. Ultimately, leadership practice fostered spiritual growth through self-reflection, compassion, and reliance on God, transforming educational leadership into a form of sustained spiritual discipline.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that *muballigh* leadership in establishing an Integrated Islamic School in a marginal rural context is deeply rooted in a phenomenon of spiritual calling rather than managerial ambition or professional advancement. In religious psychology, calling is understood as a transcendent summons that orients individuals toward meaningful life roles characterized by service and moral purpose. The lived experiences of the *muballigh* align with this conceptualization, as leadership emerges as a continuation of long-standing *dakwah* engagement rather than a strategic career choice. This supports arguments that Islamic leadership is inseparable from spiritual intentionality and ethical responsibility (Alatas, 2018; Al-Banna, 2018; Hafidhuddin, 2019).

The marginal context of the school marked by limited infrastructure, geographical isolation, and educational inequality mirrors conditions documented in studies of education in remote Indonesian regions (Abduh et al., 2022; Wijayati, 2025). In such settings, leadership driven by extrinsic incentives is often unsustainable. Instead, the *muballigh's* persistence reflects intrinsic motivation rooted in internalized religious values. This finding resonates with leadership and motivation theories suggesting that value-aligned motivation enhances endurance under adversity (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Northouse, 2021). From an Islamic perspective, leadership is framed as *amanah* a trust bestowed by Allah which transforms hardship into a moral obligation rather than a deterrent (Al-Faruqi, 2016; Tafsir, 2018).

The data further demonstrate that adversity was not interpreted as failure but as a spiritually meaningful test. This meaning-making process aligns with phenomenological accounts emphasizing that lived experience is shaped not merely by events themselves but by how individuals interpret them (Nuryana et al., 2019;

Winardi, 2025). Islamic theology provides a powerful interpretive framework in which trials are understood as expressions of divine wisdom, enabling psychological resilience and emotional regulation. Such findings support prior research indicating that positive religious coping strengthens endurance and well-being in leadership under pressure (Tasmara, 2006; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

Leadership practices observed in this study also reflect a collective rather than individualistic orientation. The reliance on *musyawarah* and community deliberation illustrates a form of distributed leadership consistent with contemporary leadership theory, which conceptualizes leadership as an emergent social practice rather than a personal trait (Daft, 2021; Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). In the Islamic context, *syura* is not merely a procedural mechanism but a normative obligation rooted in ethical governance (Burhanuddin, 2017; Syafar, 2017). This deliberative practice strengthens legitimacy and social cohesion, particularly in marginal communities where institutional authority is weak.

Community mobilization through *gotong royong* further underscores the importance of social capital in sustaining educational initiatives. Consistent with Putnam's theory of social capital, shared norms, trust, and religious solidarity enabled collective action to overcome material constraints. Previous studies on Islamic education institutions have similarly highlighted the role of communal support in sustaining schools in disadvantaged contexts (Suyatno, 2013; Barizi, 2020; Lubis, 2018). The present findings extend this literature by showing how *muballigh* leadership activates moral commitment rather than transactional participation, reinforcing education as a shared ethical project.

A central theoretical contribution of this study lies in its analysis of Islamic leadership metaphors as cognitive and moral frameworks. Drawing on Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) theory that metaphors structure thought and action, the metaphors of *khalifah*, *ra'in*, *qudwah*, and *imam* functioned as organizing principles guiding leadership behavior. Unlike secular metaphors grounded solely in embodied experience, these metaphors derive normative authority from Islamic theology, endowing leadership practice with moral and eschatological significance (Al-Attas, 2017; Belabes et al., 2021).

The prominence of the *ra'in* (shepherd) metaphor reflects leadership as care, service, and protection, especially toward vulnerable students. This resonates strongly with servant leadership theory (Greenleaf, 1977) and with prophetic traditions emphasizing that leaders are servants of their communities (Abu Dawud, 1999). However, Islamic servant leadership differs from secular models in that service is framed as worship and moral accountability before God. The prioritization of students who struggle academically reflects an Islamic conception of justice that emphasizes proportional care rather than equal treatment, challenging efficiency-driven educational paradigms (Munir, 2017; Dahlan, 2020).

The *qudwah* metaphor reinforces ethical leadership through role modeling and moral consistency. Ethical leadership theory emphasizes integrity, fairness, and moral example as mechanisms through which leaders influence followers (Kouzes & Posner,

2017; Hayati et al., 2023). In Islamic leadership, this ethical demand is intensified by the expectation of *ikhlas* (sincerity), where moral action is motivated by divine accountability rather than social approval (Al-Faruqi, 2016; Tafsir, 2018). The *imam* metaphor further integrates spiritual guidance and innovation, positioning the leader as both moral exemplar and pioneer of communal development.

The integration of these metaphors supports identity theory, which suggests that coherent leadership identity enhances effectiveness and psychological well-being. Rather than producing role conflict, the metaphors functioned synergistically, with situational salience determining which metaphor guided action at a given moment. This finding aligns with contemporary perspectives on identity integration in leadership (Avolio & Bass, 2020; Northouse, 2021).

Beyond individual leadership, the study highlights the construction of a moral community through education. Values such as integrity, empathy, gratitude, communication, and collaboration functioned not merely as personal virtues but as communal norms shaping school culture. This supports virtue ethics perspectives emphasizing that moral development occurs within traditions and social practices rather than through abstract instruction alone (Khairudin & Susiwi, 2013). The school thus operated as a moral ecosystem, where character formation was cultivated through habituation, ritual, and relational consistency.

Gratitude emerged as a particularly significant resource for resilience, echoing findings from positive psychology that link gratitude to well-being and adaptive coping. Within Islamic teaching, gratitude is institutionalized through daily worship and theological promise, making it both a psychological and spiritual practice (Tasmara, 2006). The commitment to inclusive education especially prioritizing students with learning difficulties reflects Islamic distributive justice, which emphasizes care for the vulnerable and challenges meritocratic educational logics (Dianto, 2019).

The *muballigh's* conception of legacy further reinforces a long-term moral-spiritual orientation. Success was defined not by institutional expansion but by the formation of students with noble character, aligning with the Islamic concept of *sadaqah jariyah*—ongoing charity through beneficial knowledge. This perspective encourages patience, sustainability, and resistance to short-term performance pressures, echoing sustainable leadership principles (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011).

At the same time, the findings acknowledge structural challenges, including financial sustainability and founder dependency. Efforts toward institutionalization, leadership succession, and human resource development reflect awareness of organizational sustainability beyond charismatic leadership (Wahjosumidjo, 2017; Asmadi, 2021). While the model is perceived as replicable, social innovation literature cautions that replication requires contextual adaptation rather than mechanical transfer. Local social capital, religious cohesion, and leadership legitimacy are critical enabling conditions (Nawa et al., 2022).

Overall, this study contributes to leadership and Islamic education scholarship by presenting an empirically grounded model of *muballigh* leadership that integrates

spiritual calling, Islamic metaphors, distributed leadership, and moral community building. It offers a compelling alternative to dominant leadership paradigms and provides valuable insights for addressing educational inequality in marginal contexts, particularly within faith-based educational initiatives in Indonesia and similar settings.

IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the theoretical development of Islamic religious education and leadership studies in several important ways. First, it extends Islamic leadership theory by empirically demonstrating how Islamic metaphors *khalifah*, *ra'in*, *qudwah*, and *imam* operate not merely as theological ideals but as lived cognitive and moral frameworks that actively shape leadership practice in marginal educational contexts. While previous studies have largely conceptualized Islamic leadership normatively (Al-Banna, 2018; Alatas, 2018; Belabes et al., 2021), this research provides phenomenological evidence of how these concepts are internalized, enacted, and negotiated in everyday leadership decisions.

Second, the findings refine phenomenological approaches in Islamic education research by integrating Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) with Islamic epistemology. The study demonstrates that lived experiences of leadership cannot be fully understood through secular phenomenology alone, as religious meaning systems fundamentally structure perception, motivation, and action. This challenges purely instrumental or managerial interpretations of educational leadership and reinforces the importance of meaning-making, spiritual calling, and moral accountability in Islamic educational contexts.

Third, the study challenges dominant Western leadership paradigms by presenting an alternative model of leadership that integrates servant leadership, ethical leadership, and distributed leadership within a coherent Islamic worldview. Rather than positioning Islamic leadership as a derivative or localized variant of Western theories, the findings suggest that Islamic metaphors offer an internally coherent and theoretically robust framework capable of addressing educational inequality, moral development, and institutional sustainability in marginalized settings.

Practical and Policy Implications

Practically, the findings offer important guidance for educators and educational leaders in Islamic religious education. The study highlights the central role of spiritual intentionality, moral exemplarity, and relational leadership in sustaining schools under conditions of scarcity. Educational leaders are encouraged to view leadership not merely as administrative competence but as a moral-spiritual responsibility grounded in service, care, and accountability. For teachers, the emphasis on *qudwah* underscores the importance of modeling values consistently across instructional and non-instructional contexts.

For curriculum developers, the findings support the integration of Islamic values across subjects rather than confining them to religious instruction alone. Character formation through habituation, ritual, and community engagement should be embedded systematically within curricular and extracurricular programs. This holistic approach aligns with the philosophy of Integrated Islamic Schools and strengthens coherence between knowledge, values, and practice.

From a policy perspective, the study underscores the need for greater state support for Islamic schools in marginal areas, particularly in terms of infrastructure, access, and teacher development. Policymakers should recognize community-based Islamic schools as strategic partners in addressing educational inequality. Policies that facilitate collaboration between government agencies, religious institutions, and local communities can enhance sustainability while preserving the schools' moral and cultural identity.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of a *muballigh* in establishing and leading an Integrated Islamic School in a marginal rural context through the lens of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The findings reveal that leadership in Islamic religious education is deeply rooted in a sense of spiritual calling, moral responsibility, and communal obligation rather than in managerial ambition or institutional authority. Leadership emerged as a form of *amanah* that integrates personal faith, ethical commitment, and social engagement.

The study demonstrates that Islamic leadership metaphors *khalifah*, *ra'in*, *qudwah*, and *imam* function as powerful cognitive and moral frameworks guiding leadership practice. These metaphors shape how leaders interpret responsibility, relate to students and communities, respond to adversity, and define success. In particular, the dominance of the *ra'in* metaphor highlights leadership as care, service, and protection of the most vulnerable, reinforcing Islamic principles of justice and compassion.

Beyond individual leadership, the findings emphasize the construction of education as a moral community sustained by collaboration, gratitude, and shared values. In marginal contexts characterized by limited resources, the integration of spiritual meaning, social capital, and distributed leadership enables educational initiatives to survive and grow despite structural constraints. The study also highlights the centrality of character formation as the ultimate educational legacy, aligning with Islamic conceptions of education as holistic human development.

Overall, this research contributes to Islamic education scholarship by offering an empirically grounded model of *muballigh* leadership that integrates spirituality, metaphor, and social responsibility. It provides both theoretical insight and practical guidance for strengthening Islamic education in marginalized communities, while offering an alternative leadership paradigm that prioritizes moral transformation over institutional expansion.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is limited by its single-case, idiographic design, which prioritizes depth of understanding over generalizability. The findings reflect the experiences of one *muballigh* in a specific socio-cultural and religious context and should therefore be interpreted with caution when applied to different settings. Additionally, data relied primarily on self-reported experiences, which may be influenced by retrospective reflection and social desirability.

Future research could employ comparative multi-site studies to examine how Islamic leadership metaphors are enacted across different regions, institutional types, and cultural contexts. Longitudinal studies following graduates of Islamic schools could also provide empirical evidence of the long-term impact of character-based leadership on students and communities. Further research integrating perspectives of teachers, parents, and students would enrich understanding of how leadership meanings are collectively constructed.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for qualitative research. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional authority. All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. Participants' identities were anonymized to ensure confidentiality, and all data were used solely for academic research purposes.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to the research participant and the local community for their openness, trust, and cooperation throughout the research process. Appreciation is also extended to colleagues and reviewers whose constructive feedback contributed to the refinement of this article.

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