Research article

The new identity of Indonesian Islamic boarding schools in the "new normal": the education leadership response to COVID-19

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

The purpose of this study was to investigate the leadership practices of Indonesian Islamic boarding school (pesantren) leaders, school principals, and teachers in responding to the health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure the continuation of boarding school education in the "new normal" period. Generated using a moderated focus group discussion with principals and teachers, the findings suggest that principals' and teachers' leadership practices are acceptable in the policy, social support, and financial dimensions but still lack structural and teaching aspects about conducting blended learning. Based on this study's findings, pesantren leaders (kyai) and school principals should pay attention to training programs for implementing blended learning for teachers. The government is encouraged to assist in providing technical facilities pesantren can implement blended learning more effectively.

1. Introduction

Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) has wreaked havoc within modern life. Its impact is enduring and will continue in every sector of life, including radically changing education structure. This COVID-19 phenomenon thus serves as a turning point for structuring and recreating education (Harris, 2020), while the reconstruction will depend on the decisions leaders make (Dirani et al., 2020). Currently, schooling sectors are in crisis and need direction from education leaders and stakeholders. Several studies have also been conducted as precedents and initial guidance on the leadership enactment in schools during the COVID-19 crisis (Harris, 2020; Harris and Jones, 2020). However, very little attention has been reported about how school leaders have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study contributes empirical evidence and further guidance on the leadership response to the prolonged educational crisis.

Our investigation centers around the educational leadership enacted in pesantren education or Islamic boarding schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Both terms were used interchangeably in this study. This educational institution has received scant attention from experts during

the COVID-19 pandemic (Brooks, 2018; Brooks et al., 2020; Khalil and DeCuir, 2018). Apparently, this is the first attempt to investigate how pesantren leaders have demonstrated their ability to position themselves as true leaders and bring the pesantren to a better position in times of pandemics. This study seeks to fill this gap by associating various studies on the responses to education leadership, in general, with the findings from research conducted in the context of pesantren education in Indonesia.

Anchored by the propositions above, the present study serves as a direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the education sector, in general, and Islamic boarding schools, in particular. This study's general purpose was to identify the extent of leadership practices about pesantren leaders and teachers in ensuring the sustainability of education in the pesantren. In particular, the study investigated the leadership practice patterns of pesantren leaders and considered teachers' new roles based on the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Three questions that guide this study are (1) To what extent is the leadership response carried out by the leaders and teachers in Islamic boarding schools?; (2) What are the leadership competencies needed by pesantren leaders during and after the crisis?;

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and (3) What role do teachers play in supporting *pesantren* leaders during and after the crisis?

This study was conducted in East Java, Indonesia, and included observations of Islamic boarding school sites and focus group discussions with Islamic boarding school leaders. This paper begins with an overview of the condition of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic, and then, in order to provide a theoretical framework, discusses relevant literature on school leadership in times of crisis. In this paper, we present several themes resulting from our analysis and discussion, which critically look at the education system's dimension that has accepted the impacts and challenges of COVID-19. In the following section, we explore the role that *pesantren* leadership has needed to play in crisis times, followed by portraying the teachers' role in supporting *pesantren* leaders to adapt to the "new normal" COVID-19 pandemic.

1.1. Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia

The Islamic boarding school, or *pesantren,* is the oldest type of Islamic education in Indonesia. The *pesantren* was born as a religious response from the local community for acculturation to the local Islamic culture. Pesantren education aims to create individuals who understand Islamic religious knowledge as a way of life (*tafaqquh fi al-din*) by emphasizing ethics and morals (*akhlaq karimah*) in society. The *pesantren* plays an essential role in fulfilling Indonesia's national education goals. According to Lukens-Bull (2010), "Islamic boarding school" is another name for *madrasa* (Islamic school). In Indonesia's local understanding of *madrasa* education, *pesantren* is viewed from the madrasa's pan-Islamic concept (Madmarn, 1999).

Several elements that constitute the *pesantren* different from other educational institutions are dormitories as student residences, *santri* (students), mosques as places of worship, madrasa as centers for educational activities, *kyai* as the highest leaders for the teaching of Islam, and the appeal it offers (Dhofier, 2000). In other words, the *pesantren* are led by the *kyai,* who hold absolute power and religious authority (Srimulyani, 2012), and consist of several schools with various levels, from primary to secondary, headed by a school principal. Thus, the *kyai*, as the head of the *pesantren,* and the school principals, co-manage education in the *pesantren*. Using the *kyai* as a symbol of the *pesantren* has leverage within society as the principal's ability to encourage the community is reduced (Lukens-Bull, 2005).

The *pesantren* encompasses divergence in its education system, including a traditional system (*salaf),* a modern system (*khalaf*), and an integrated system. The *pesantren salaf* (traditional *pesantren*) only conducts religious education and character development, while the *pesantren khalaf* (modern *pesantren*) is characterized by religious education and general education as well as skills training (Lukens-Bull, 2010). However, it was further explained that most *pesantren* could be placed in an integrated category. As such, we situated our study site in this integrated-categorized *pesantren,* balancing both religious education (*madrasa*) and general education (public school).

1.2. The impact of COVID-19 on Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia

The increasing cases of COVID-19 in Indonesia have encouraged communities and local governments to continue to support the policy of closing Islamic boarding schools (Setiati and Azwar, 2020). When government schools transform learning from offline to online, *pesantren* education is ignored. There is almost no formulation applied to continue *pesantren* education (Muazza et al., 2018). Indeed, some sizeable Islamic boarding schools have started to adopt modern education with the latest technological facilities. However, under pandemic conditions, these advancements do not significantly help in the online learning process. Consequently, students have to be sent home and simply stay at home without any learning activities directly integrated with the *pesantren*.

This condition encourages the parents to request a return to the *pesantren;* otherwise, they cannot control their children properly.

Concerning this, very few parents can play an influential role in assisting and supporting their children's learning at home. Parents encounter difficulties due to several factors, such as a lack of devices, time and expertise, and not offering multi-layered learning approaches (Brom et al., 2020). As a result, this phenomenon has raised debates among the public regarding the policy of temporarily stopping learning activities in Islamic boarding schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether this policy has lower negative consequences for students or vice versa has often been asked. Moreover, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have been underestimated. The calculation of the impact of closing the *pesantren* should consider physical health and non-physical aspects.

When policies eventually lead to the pesantren's opening, the most fundamental question is whether the *pesantren* are ready. Returning children to school has become an ongoing problem and has been debated in society (Harris and Jones, 2020). The situation at the communal-based *pesantren* illustrates the ideal conditions for implementing the maximum health protocol, for example, by conducting independent isolation of all students through the blocking of access to and from the *pesantren*. Acknowledging the pesantren's distinctiveness, reopening can be considered a sensible policy to restore education, but it is essential to ensure that the students' conditions are safe.
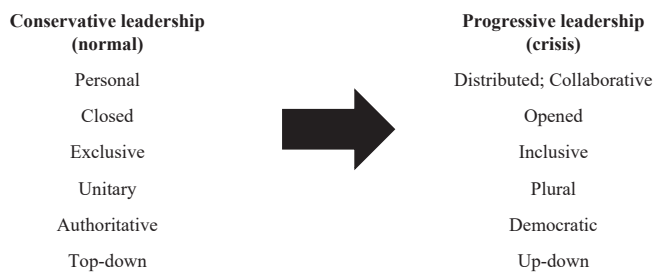
On the other hand, the *pesantren* has several weaknesses. In terms of habits and culture, students at a *pesantren* have a habit of doing activities together, such as eating, playing, studying, and sleeping. Other cultures greet each other with kisses between students and *kyai*, male teachers and female teachers. More importantly, the student dormitory consists of one room which is filled with 10–20 people. This situation leads to complicated enforcement of the social distancing policy. Students' activities are very closely packed in a pesantren, while the students' standard of immunity and nutritional intake still needs improvement. This condition increases the risk of the students being infected and creating new clusters of COVID-19 infection. In short, the encouragement of various parties to carry out a "new normal" in *pesantren* life is very worrying because instead of saving *santri* from academic degeneration and COVID-19, *pesantren* that are community-based, with a tendency to being communal, have the potential of becoming a new cluster. Therefore, in times of crisis, pesantren leaders' educational leadership response is needed to meet parents' expectations and demands to keep students safe from the threat of COVID-19.

1.3. Theoretical framework

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the most common leadership type in schools was traditional leadership (Harris, 2020). In the context of the *pesantren*, this traditional leadership pattern is strongly embedded in the character of the *kyai.* The approach used is charismatic leadership and personal and religious feudalism, which means it is considered less optimistic in terms of democratic development, egalitarianism, and openness (Alam, 2018).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the *kyai* cannot rely on leadership in the traditional sense - such as a charismatic, top-down, or authoritative approach - to emerge from a complex crisis (Dirani et al., 2020). The traditional leadership techniques of the *kyai* ought to be weakened and shifted to a more progressive type of leadership with several characteristics, namely distributed, collaborative, and networked leadership (Brooks et al., 2020; Harris, 2020). This type of leadership is necessary for the *pesantren* to survive in crisis times (Harris and Jones, 2020). In other words, crises require democratic structures, not bureaucratic ones, and movement away from conventional wisdom to flexible decision making (Smith and Riley, 2012), as portrayed in Figure 1.

In facing this crisis, *pesantren* leaders should provide certainty and clarity, raising hope (Smith and Riley, 2012) and ensuring transparent, open, and timely communication with the pesantren community members (Dirani et al., 2020; Smith and Riley, 2012). *Pesantren* leaders should also provide sensitive and thoughtful leadership (Whitla, 2003). This means that leaders should focus on dealing with events, emotions, and

Conservative leadership (normal)	Progressive leadership (crisis)
Personal	Distributed; Collaborative
Closed	Opened
Exclusive	Inclusive
Unitary	Plural
Authoritative	Democratic
Top-down	Up-down

Figure 1. School leadership in normal times vs. crisis time (adapted from Brooks et al., 2020).

consequences by minimizing personal losses at the *pesantren* (Smith and Riley, 2012). The pesantren leaders' priority should be to focus on the welfare of teachers, students, parents, and all stakeholders involved in reopening Islamic boarding school education services (Harris and Jones, 2020). *Pesantren* leaders should ensure that students' emotional, social, and mental well-being is nurtured and supported (Harris, 2020). It has been shown that *pesantren* leaders' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis can shift the economic, social, and health issues of *pesantren* residents (Dirani et al., 2020); for example, Youssef et al. (2020) have developed a comprehensive framework consisting of four dimensions, namely policy, structural, social, and financial, to help leaders mitigate education in responding to COVID-19. Table 1 details these four dimensions and their definitions.

2. Method

Qualitative research is a systematic investigation of social phenomena in natural settings that includes how individuals and/or groups behave and how organizations function (Teherani et al., 2015). This study employed a qualitative approach involving focus group discussions. Focus groups are often used in data collection, based on a qualitative approach, as it provides some advantages. A focus group is a form of qualitative research that involves gathering a group of people and asking them about their attitudes toward a concept, product, or idea for curriculum, program improvement, organizational development, and evaluation of results (Leung and Savithiri, 2009). Focus groups allow participants and facilitators to interact freely and build ideas and conversations (Austin and Sutton, 2014). Also, focus groups can encourage people who are reluctant to be interviewed or feel they have nothing to say (Kitzinger, 1995).

Table 1. Four dimensions for leadership practice in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Youssef et al., 2020).

Dimensions	Operational definition
Policy	Ensuring responses are well-coordinated and valid. Emergency measures include academic, government, and organizational sustainability, policy transparency, and stakeholder communication.
Structural	Enabling online learning solutions and supporting infrastructure, including infrastructure availability, teaching standards and skills, assessment flexibility, and syllabus.
Social	Providing solutions to meet the needs of students, educators, parents, and educational leaders, including appropriate access, extracurricular social support, and family support.
Financial	Ensuring availability and accessibility of (online) learning solutions through investments and partnerships, including financial support, planning, and budgeting.

2.1. Recruitment

Before the study's commencement, we sent requests for ethical approval and recommendations for Islamic boarding schools as research sites to the city-level education offices and the ministry of religion. It was recommended that we situate the study in Darul Faqih Islamic Boarding School in Malang Regency, Indonesia. This *pesantren* was recommended based on several considerations, namely 1) this *pesantren* combines traditional and modern education; 2) this *pesantren* successfully enacted "new normal" education during COVID-19; and 3) we obtained full access to the data sites in this *pesantren*. We explained our study objectives to the leaders and teachers in this *pesantren*. Apart from that, we also asked for their voluntary participation via written e-mail and informal communication via telephone. In this study, confidentiality was guaranteed, and each participant had the right to drop out. The head of the *pesantren*, the principal, and all the teachers, participated in the focus groups. All participants were asked critical questions for reflection before the data collection process was carried out, ensuring that participants were prepared and comfortable during the audio-tape and written recording processes.

2.2. Methodological approach

This study's moderated focus group involved *kyai*, school principals, and teachers at Darul Faqih Islamic Boarding School. One focus group, consisting of three participants with a total of five groups (two groups of *kyai* and school principals and three groups of teachers), discussed and recorded their feelings about the educational leadership that had been implemented, as well as identifying potential solutions to any challenges faced by the *pesantren*. Data collection lasted for one week, and each group met and held discussions on two occasions with a duration of 45–60 min each. Discussions took place in separate rooms at Darul Faqih Islamic Boarding School by implementing strict health protocols. No personal or identifying information was sought. Respondents' participation was completely consensual, anonymous, and voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The Institutional Review Board granted ethics approval at the Institute of Research and Community Services, Universitas Negeri Malang. The collecting data was conducted according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

The questions used in the focus group were centered around the four dimensions of the education system that are impacted by the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, including policy, structural, social, and financial aspects, as described by Youssef et al. (2020). The discussion began by asking questions about the policy of the opening of educational services, such as face-to-face learning activities in the schools in the red and yellow zones, which, according to government edicts, are not allowed. How does this affect this *pesantren*? When did it start? Is it by government recommendations? These questions were then replaced by questions that focus on the structural, social, and financial dimensions. For example, has there been any special training conducted to enable teachers to teach more optimally and safely? Does the school continue to provide extracurricular social support and ensure social welfare? What about those with economic problems? Is there any financial support provided by the government or other institutions? How do you solve the financial problems of the *pesantren* during this crisis? Besides, we also conducted observations around the *pesantren* by walking into each class and student bedroom to ensure that the pesantren's facilities were under strict health protocols.

2.3. Data analysis

Data were analyzed using content analysis, with four main stages: decontextualization, recontextualization, categorization, and compilation (Bengtsson, 2016). Data analysis was carried out at the manifest level using the informants' words and the appropriate unit of meaning as a reference. This choice was implemented in order to stay closer to

the original meaning and context. In this study, an apriori code was made deductively, referring to the literature on the four dimensions of the education system impacted and challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic (Youssef et al., 2020). The deductive code was implemented in order to obtain high data reliability (Catanzaro, 1988). These codes serve as lenses to analyze data and minimize educational leadership's complexity (Brooks et al., 2020). It helps us consider, question, and imagine how the leadership response, shown by pesantren leaders and teachers, is viewed from four dimensions: policy, structural, social, and financial.

In the decontextualization stage, we became familiar with the data and read the entire transcript to learn how the "new normal" conditions in the *pesantren* were enacted. After that, the transcript was broken down into meaningful units and labeled with a code. In the recontextualization stage, we read and check the final list of meaningful units. We provided different text colors to facilitate coded labeling. We stored several texts that were not labeled and colored for inclusion in one of the codes or removed and excluded.

In the categorization stage, along with the principal investigator, we used inductive and iterative processes (Miles et al., 2013) to identify descriptive categories, such as that *pesantren* leaders should share leadership with the teachers; *pesantren* leaders should pay attention to the financial and emotional conditions of students and parents; teachers should help establish cooperation, and teachers should develop technological skills. These categories were refined into themes for educational leadership roles in decision-making, process support and learning technology, supporters of emotional stability for students and parents, and guardians of *pesantren* financial health. We have been trained to achieve consistency in criteria and quality of data coding (Cohen's Kappa for intra- and inter-observer reliability above 0.75). Finally, in the compilation stage, we concluded. In this final stage, we employed member checking to ensure the data's validity (Catanzaro, 1988). Besides, we provided peer training (Williams and Todd, 2016) to examine misconceptions and errors in detecting and classifying data to reduce bias (Brooks et al., 2020). Through the use of these multiple methods - peer debriefing, fieldwork, collaborative processes, and triangulation - the research findings are guaranteed to be reliable (Silverman, 2013). Figure 2 presents the data analysis stage.

3. Results

This section presents the findings from the policy, structural, social, and financial dimensions.

3.1. Policy

This is different from most schools in various countries globally, where decisions on reopening schools are generally made after local infection rates have slowed down significantly. Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia have reopened amidst the increasing local infection rate. This is outlined in the following interview with *kyai*:

> "*This decision was made based on several considerations and consultations with school principals, teachers, and parents of students. Making the policy to reopen pesantren is an effort to ensure the sustainability of the pesantren learning process. Several problems are our main consideration, including slowing student development, less smooth education administration, and uncertainty over when the learning process will continue or will be closed due to new cases of infection. We recognize that the reopening of pesantren is a daunting challenge and full of risks. Therefore, we implemented some decisions to provide a sense of security to teachers and students from the threat of the spread of COVID-19.*"

Most students work on assignments with their parents during learning from home, resulting in decreased independence and abilities. The teacher said that "*during online learning, students have shown a lack of*
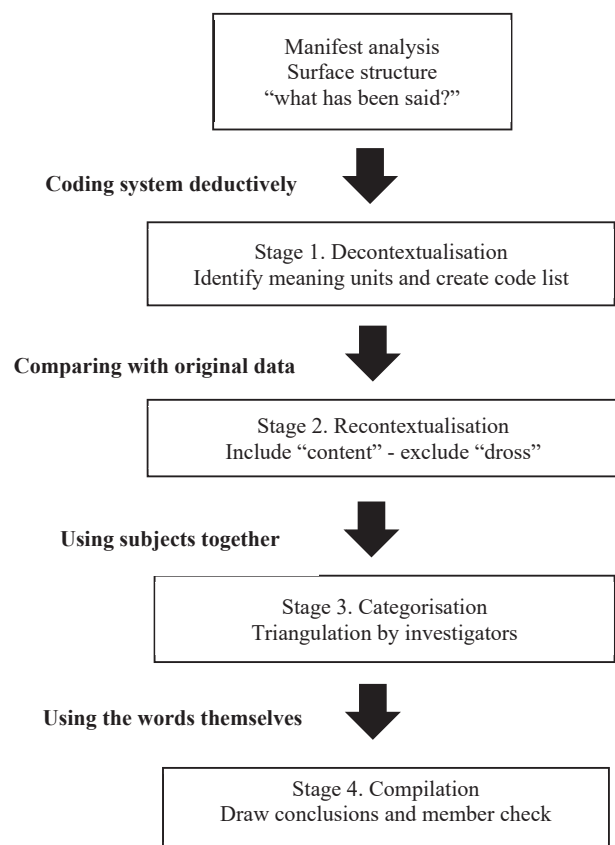
Figure 2. Process of a qualitative content analysis (adapted from Bengtsson, 2016).

responsibility and discipline. Students often submit assignments late. This bad habit lasts for approximately two to three months during the closing of the pesantren." Meanwhile, *pesantren* administration continues to run normally, both when students learn from home and are in the *pesantren* environment. This is illustrated in the following interview with the principal:

> "*The institution has prepared online administrative services through the pesantren website, such as information on school activities, registration, and payment of school fees. The obstacle we experience is the difficulty in managing the neatness of administrative data. So far, Islamic boarding schools have mostly implemented manual administration, requiring more time to be transported to the website or online platform developed. During an uncertain situation, pesantren policies have been made flexible in response to the latest situations, and administrators have been trained to be able to improve their approaches following the new policies.*"

To ensure that the *pesantren* continues to open and there are no cases of COVID-19 infection in the *pesantren* environment, the *pesantren* leader has implemented health and quarantine screening as declared by the *kyai*, "*To prevent cases of COVID-19 infection, we check the temperature of students and teachers at least twice a day, require students to quarantine for 14 days before entering Islamic boarding schools and carry out rapid tests to detect COVID-19 early.*" Besides, good hygiene and cleaning are also mandatory for all *pesantren* residents. The principal said that "*Teachers and students are required to wash their hands frequently with running water and soap, use masks and face shields while in class, and arrange for the use of boarding school equipment and facilities.*"

The *pesantren* leadership also makes many decisions to engage in activities freely and pleasantly, but still, pay attention to the security aspect. The teacher contended that "*Together with the students, we continue to strive to implement social distancing as much as possible following the*

agreed instructions with the pesantren leadership." The *kyai* illustrates this in the following interview:

"*We, together with the principal and teachers, have made simple instructions for the implementation of the "new normal" so that students can easily understand it; reducing hands-on learning activities, increasing rest hours for students so that the immune system is maintained, making learning hours more relaxed and flexible, prohibiting parental visits, prohibiting handshakes with teachers and friends, adding bedrooms and bathrooms, and turning the hall into an emergency classroom. Social distancing has been applied by reducing students' numbers to 10 per class with a distance of two meters between students. The ratio of rooms previously filled with 12 students is now reduced to six students, with a ratio of students and a building area of 1:3 meters.*"

The leadership's efforts cannot guarantee that *pesantren* residents will be safe from COVID-19 infection. There is a vast possibility that *pesantren* will be closed again depending on the increase in infection cases during this pandemic. In the interview, the principal contended that:

"*Acknowledging the possibility of a COVID-19 infection case, we have undertaken an anticipatory policy so that the education process would be able to continue. This policy is in the form of efforts to digitize the pesantren, for example, by increasing the capacity of the website server to support learning from home, preparing a mobile app that can access official pesantren accounts in one simple application platform, and by considering the capacity of the internet quota, and preparing a YouTube channel as a medium to assist children when learning at home. These efforts are part of developing a strategy that can be adapted depending on the level of COVID-19 transmission. When there is one case of a student or teacher who is confirmed positive for COVID-19, the pesantren can be closed and immediately switch to online learning for at least the following 14 days.*"

To ensure academic sustainability while still paying attention to students' and teachers' health requires coordination with various stakeholders. There is a special division with which to coordinate on the COVID-19 problem. This division is temporary until the end of the pandemic period. This division is directly led by the *kyai* and the principal, and whose members are teachers and students' daily activities assistants. In the interview, the *kyai* stated that:

"*In order for all leadership decisions to be carried out effectively and responsibly, we have formed a team whose task it is to coordinate with the local Regional Leadership Coordination Forum. Periodically, the Sub-district Leadership Conference has directly reviewed the facilities provided and activities carried out in the institution. In terms of security, the division team coordinates with the sector police, military district commanders, and the village government to ensure public safety and order in the pesantren environment. Meanwhile, in terms of health, the division team coordinates with the nearest health center. The Community Health Center (PUSKESMAS) assigns two nurses to check students' health twice a week routinely. Puskesmas also provide health education to students and form student health installations.*"

This division is also formed by many senior teachers who are considered to have mature leadership. In the interview, they shared that:

"*Some of us are also a division team that coordinates, especially with the community and parents. This team has been running effectively, especially the team of teachers to communicate several parents' concerns over problems faced by students to the pesantren leadership and vice versa.*"

3.2. Structure and teaching

The teaching process recommended by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia is blended learning. However, the pesantren's life, which does face-to-face learning, has created several new challenges and problems in its implementation,

including inadequate facilities and teacher competence. The teacher said, "*To be honest, we have never done online learning before, and it was difficult for us.*" The *kyai* shares this in the following interview:

"*Pesantren do not yet have adequate internet and computer facilities. Besides, some teachers live in areas with poor internet networks and periodic blackouts, which will certainly hamper distance learning. Teachers' Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills are also quite low. Teachers in pesantren are not familiar with distance learning; almost all of the previous learning processes have been conducted face-to-face.*"

To overcome this, teachers are given training, which is carried out before any learning begins in the "new normal" period. This training includes activities to increase teachers' capacity and capability in using ICT in their teaching. This activity will also guide them in teaching safely and comfortably and making learning fun in the "new normal" era. The *kyai* stated that "*The principal and we have planned several programs for teacher ICT development, and one of them is online learning application training.*" One of the teachers in our interview shared that:

"*The training we received focuses on online learning using Google Meet, Zoom, Google Forms, online presence, and a YouTube channel. We feel this is the positive side of the "new normal" condition as our ICT skills are getting better. This condition indirectly makes teachers aware of the importance of mastering the use of ICT in the classroom. With this training, we hope to be able to apply blended learning quickly and effectively. This is a major advance in pesantren education. I believe these efforts can lead to higher standards and quality of learning.*"

Broadly speaking, the *pesantren* performs several actions, which are classified into short-term and long-term solutions. The principal stated that:

"*The solution, in the short term, taken by the pesantren, is to ask students to learn from national television broadcasts provided by the government and they suggest accessing learning applications that are also supported by internet providers so that the cost of internet access is reduced. For the long term, the pesantren will collaborate with experts and lecturers at leading universities in the field of education to be involved in digitizing the pesantren.*"

Another challenge is curriculum change. Teachers need to effectively learn and follow the conditions in responding to uncertain situations and limited learning. Teachers are given training on changing the learning curriculum, including the syllabus, lesson plans, learning strategies, learning objectives, and targets achieved by students during the pandemic period, by still referring to the educational calendar. The principal said that "*We continue to remind teachers to focus on important materials and especially on learning related to the prevention of covid-19 transmission.*" We can also see this from the following interview with one of the participating teachers:

"*There is no change in the educational calendar for learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. All educational activities follow the educational calendar set by the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Religion. The pesantren cannot make changes to the educational calendar because this is a central government authority.*"

Changes in class interactions also occur because it is forbidden to gather and be close together. With the application of health protocols during classroom learning, teachers and students tend to adjust quickly. A teacher contended that "*together with our students, we trained to become used to learning with limited interaction. This condition also required us to reformulate the appropriate learning assessment.*"

3.3. Social support

The decision by the *pesantren* leader to prohibit parent visits and limit the number of student activities in the *pesantren* environment

caused students to feel uncomfortable and less enthusiastic in undertaking their education, as explained by the *kyai* in the following interview:

> "*We see that students feel they have lost the support of their parents, especially at an age where they still need their parents' attention. In collaboration with the principal, we encourage daily activity assistants and teachers at the pesantren to give students their full attention to solve this problem. However, we are aware that parental attention is still needed by students and cannot be replaced. We need to continue to strive to foster student motivation in various ways.*"

Additionally, the decision to apply social distancing makes students uncomfortable. The teacher shared that "*students feel that the distance limitation hinders communication and interaction, especially in class, because students in Islamic boarding schools are accustomed to doing activities together with their friends.*" Trying to achieve their goals while paying attention to social distancing is a difficult balance for students and adversely affects their physical and emotional health. This issue is depicted in the following interview with the principal:

> "*Seeing the students' poor mental condition, the pesantren tries to provide support in the form of offline and online counseling services using a one-on-one system in collaboration with professionals, so that students' mental well-being is fulfilled. Mental health professionals also provide training to teachers in psychological first aid. Students with severe problems are usually referred for additional services.*"

As for students who are still not allowed to return to the *pesantren* because they are new students or come from the red zone (areas with high transmission rates of COVID-19), the *pesantren* tries to offer social, psychological, and pedagogical support to parents. The teacher said that "*The main problem with learning from home is the low pedagogical skills of parents that have an impact by slowing student progress. This is the main reason parents ask that the learning process at the pesantren be started immediately.*" Parents feel stressed because they have to assist their children in learning and lack parents' guidelines to accompany children's learning. Facing this condition, the principal explained in the interview that the pesantren made the following efforts:

> "*We continue to encourage teachers to provide online services for parents through websites and telephone communication with a one on one system. This service includes counseling in changes in student behavior and a simple guide to student learning assistance. In the long term, pesantren will develop an integrated curriculum between home education and the pesantren. The aim is to provide accommodation and educational alternatives with a home-based learning approach.*"

3.4. Financial support

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic sector has also been impacted significantly. The Kyai said that "*We have made adjustments to the economic pressure on student families. We hope that this step can help students prepare to return to study without any financial constraints.*" To ensure academic sustainability, the *pesantren* are taking steps to provide relief to students from low-income families. The teacher said that "*In addition to social support issues, we also surveyed parents' financial difficulties. This can help pesantren leaders to decide who will receive free school fee.*" The principal also stated that:

> "*Together with the kyai, I have agreed to provide tuition relief for underprivileged students. We have done the mapping based on family income data before the pandemic and during the pandemic. This data provides a basis for us to determine which students will receive a monthly education fee cut of up to 75%, depending on how much influence the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the family economy. In addition, we provide relief in the form of postponement of payment of annual tuition fees, which originally had to be paid two to three times by all students.*"

For the *pesantren* to continue running with limited finances, the principal has prepared budget changes and a budget reallocation. The principal contended that "*Finance is focused on building facilities and infrastructure as well as performance allowances. We have also made savings on the budget allocation for secondary needs, which could be allocated to teacher allowances and student needs.*" Besides, the *pesantren* does not ask parents for additional costs for the management of COVID-19. Finances for handling COVID-19 come from government assistance and the relocation of the educational budget for institutions used to support COVID-19 handling activities. The teacher said:

> "*We also have anxieties related to finances. Fortunately, the pesantren leaders have made it clear. Currently, we are trying to reduce the costs involved in implementing the teaching and learning process. We have to be able to choose which ones are important to give to students.*"

To further strengthen financial support, the *pesantren* collaborates with individuals and institutions. During the interview, the principal stated that:

> "*Our pesantren has opened a special account number to provide an opportunity for everyone, especially entrepreneurs, to assist in the form of funds for education and student living expenses while in the pesantren. Also, we have collaborated with several institutions, for example, Rabithah Ma'ahid Islamiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and the Indonesian Red Cross (PMI), to reduce the burden of financing the handling and prevention of the spread of COVID-19 in the pesantren environment.*"

4. Discussion

This study investigates the leadership practices of pesantren leaders and teachers during the coronavirus crisis in Indonesia. It is essential to understand how pesantren leaders and teachers have demonstrated their ability as true leaders to enable decision-makers to unravel barriers that affect the sustainability of the pesantren learning process, saving santri from academic degeneration and prevent them from the potential of becoming a new cluster of COVID-19 transmission.

This study's findings portray several patterns of leadership response practices dealing with ways *pesantren* leaders play a role during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Netolicky (2020), in general, the actions taken by *pesantren* leaders reflect leadership in times of crisis, namely fast, forward-looking, and carefully considering every choice and consequence. The findings yield empirical evidence against many preliminary guidelines and precedents on how to guide schools in crisis times, which were, initially, only based on a literature review (Harris, 2020; Harris and Jones, 2020; Smith and Riley, 2012). Research on the crisis leadership response emphasizes that *pesantren* leaders should plan, respond to, and learn from the critical events of COVID-19. Meanwhile, teachers have the responsibility to support leaders by preparing for crises. By improving teaching skills and providing virtual services to parents and students, teachers can help build *pesantren* resilience during crises. Teachers should support *pesantren* leaders in building positive public sentiment toward the recovery of the *pesantren* education sector.

From the analysis, it was seen that many roles were enacted by pesantren leaders, school principals, and teachers from policy and structural dimensions to social and financial dimensions to support *pesantren* resilience efforts in times of the COVID-19 crisis. The following are four roles formulated based on the research findings and the four leadership dimensions used as a theoretical framework.

4.1. Policy dimensions: decision maker

From the interviews with teachers and Kyai, it can be seen that many parents expect that the *pesantren* will be reopened in a "new normal" condition. This hope arises as there are some crucial problems with studying online as an emergency measure and preventing the spread of

COVID-19. Students begin to neglect their studies and act less disciplined. The possible reason is that not all students receive adequate online learning support and have skilled parents (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019; OECD, 2020). In general, students also lack concentration during online learning (Bao, 2020).

This situation implies that the crisis due to COVID-19 was not anticipated and demands that pesantren leaders implement standard response procedures. Moreover, there is ample evidence that the end of the COVID-19 crisis is increasingly unpredictable (Sterpetti, 2020). *Pesantren* leaders are starting to think that it is impossible to continue relying on the government's guidelines for COVID-19 procedures and protocols in the education sector. In other words, emergency measures that have been implemented so far are no longer practical. By treating COVID-19 as a short-term crisis, leaders will miss a significant opportunity to lead differently (Harris, 2020) and improve school systems (Zhao, 2020).

On the other hand, *pesantren* leaders should find solutions to accommodate the expectations of the parents. This expectation demands professional and wise action from the boarding school leadership. In short, the difficulty and impact of implementing online learning as an emergency measure and the high expectations of parents for the reopening of education services encourage *pesantren* leaders to prepare themselves for the "new normal."

This study reveals that implementing the "new normal" in the *pesantren* relies heavily on pesantren leaders and teachers' responses in implementing strict health protocols. The careful application of social distancing among students is responsible. Some infrastructure disinfection measures (CDC, 2020), the strengthening of hygiene practices, and the implementation of social distancing (Uscher-Pines et al., 2018) are the best strategies to use in an effort to return students to the *pesantren*.

Our study also found that parents expect pesantren leaders to understand the students' various difficulties from the teachers' interviews. From this viewpoint, teachers should be in a position to help *pesantren* leaders understand the ramifications of the crisis that is happening. Teachers should take advantage of their closeness to parents to understand how they respond to the COVID-19 crisis. This information then needs to be presented to the *pesantren* leaders as material to base their decisions. Also, data from teachers who teach virtually can help leaders assess the situation more clearly. Teachers should establish regular minimum communication with students and parents and support student learning and development (Bubb and Jones, 2020; König et al., 2020).

Furthermore, this study portrays that *Pesantren* leaders have provided direction in building cooperation with various parties. The enactment of the "new normal" in *pesantren* is not tricky if various stakeholders have strong synergies. Cooperation between the *pesantren*, parents, the surrounding community, and several socio-religious organizations under the pesantren leader's coordination is key to successfully implementing the "new normal" *pesantren*. Strategies developed by *pesantren* leaders should be updated and communicated closely with local public authorities (Cheng et al., 2020). Regarding this pandemic, it is essential to understand that there is a relationship between the implemented policies and the community's response, and there is a need to foster mutual understanding in policymaking (Weible et al., 2020), inclusive of the students' parents. Forging more substantial relationships with parents/community groups is necessary when facing the many problems caused by COVID-19 (Harris and Jones, 2020). Leaders should act quickly and think critically to find and formulate new action strategies (Eraut, 1995).

4.2. Structural dimensions: supporting the learning process and technology

Online learning trends provide several opportunities for the *pesantren*, enabling students and teachers to learn from alternative locations, accelerating the digitization of the *pesantren*, and saving costs. In line with the previous research, online learning can provide good prospects for education in the "new normal" era (Cahapay, 2020; Norberg et al., 2011). However, our study found that online learning in *pesantren* may encounter some obstacles, ranging from incompatibility with the curriculum, methods, and traditions of *pesantren* education, most of which require direct interaction between teachers and students, especially in the case of religious guidance, exemplary, and other religious lectures, to limited supporting technology and the inadequate ICT skills of the teachers.

Pesantren leaders should encourage teachers' infrastructure development and ICT training (Obana, 2020; Olivier, 2020). After all, leadership should include development to integrate technology into organizations. Since technology has become an essential part of education, leaders should ensure that teachers and students can use technology to take place in the learning process. Apart from technology, leaders should also pay attention to pedagogical aspects. Leaders should find a balance between technology and pedagogy (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2020). While pedagogy is an important key in the learning process, technology also plays a role (Harris and Jones, 2020). Therefore, *pesantren* leaders should encourage teachers to discuss possible obstruction of the learning process. In this way, the teacher will be more aware of the main problems, decisions, and solutions that should be carefully considered when carrying out learning during the "new normal" (Cahapay, 2020).

In this study, we have found that the learning principle applied in pesantren is not to force students to meet all targets but to allow students to complete the learning activities and maintain their motivation (Daniel, 2020). The teacher's role is to provide material that is significant, relevant, and useful (Bao, 2020; Print, 1993), especially about the prevention of COVID-19, for example, social distancing (Flannery, 2020) and hygiene sanitation (Goser, 2020). To respond to the changes in students' interactions, teachers are also advised to move from quantitative to qualitative assessment to facilitate assessment (Dilanchyan, 2020). However, the teacher still has to pay attention to this assessment's impact, especially the decline in student motivation (Farrington, 2020). This situation also opens opportunities for teachers to make on-the-spot online assessments using applications such as Zoom (Cahapay, 2020), Moodle, and Google Meet (Liberman et al., 2020) to reduce direct interaction.

4.3. Social dimensions: supporting the emotional stability of students and parents

From the analysis, it can be seen that the policies, such as prohibiting parent visits, limiting the number of students' activities, and applying social distancing, have made the learning condition uncomfortable and less enthusiastic. This condition can affect students' psychological well-being for a long time (Wang et al., 2020). Also, when routines, such as eating and sleeping habits (Ghosh et al., 2020) at the *pesantren* are disrupted (YoungMinds, 2020), the obligation to carry out a 14-day quarantine for each student before returning to the pesantren can worsen mental health (Sprang and Silman, 2013). Therefore, providing positive support for students to participate freely in activities and making the situation normal are essential points that should not be overlooked by the pesantren's leadership (Grubic et al., 2020; OECD, 2020). The *pesantren* should ensure students carry out social distancing while, at the same time, paying attention to their mental health (Wise, 2020).

Our study also found that students' parents also struggle with accumulated stress due to significant changes in their roles and assignments, so they also need support (OECD, 2020). In summary, during and after the pandemic, *pesantren* leaders and teachers are expected to help parents and students overcome any emotional problems. Pesantren leaders should be aware of the need to provide mental health protection for students and parents. Leaders and teachers need to understand the problems that individual students experience and guide them by solving them.

4.4. Financial: protecting the financial health of the pesantren

Lastly, we found that financing learning is another problem faced by parents. This is in line with the previous study, showing that the anxiety symptoms experienced by students and parents have a positive correlation with the economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Cao et al., 2020). Because of this, the *pesantren* leaders need to make the *pesantren* economically resilient. Participant leaders need to play an essential role during a crisis, not only for the institution but also for the students and the parents.

Our study also found that financial barriers have impeded the learning process in the pesantren. Teachers also face accumulated economic stress, and so, their welfare also needs attention (OECD, 2020). *Pesantren* leaders can work at opening communication lines with teachers about the financial position of the *pesantren*. This may positively impact teachers when they are kept informed about why several pesantren programs should be postponed or eliminated. Within the emergency curriculum framework, some access to learning resources may also have to be limited. The teacher should focus on the essential material that should be taught. Saving money can help save the *pesantren* from the threat of ceasing all educational activities.

Furthermore, our study revealed an apparent leadership pattern shown by the pesantren leaders that showcases asymmetrical leadership roles between *kyai*, school principals, and teachers. This indicates that the leadership needed in this crisis period is educational leadership that pays more attention to and emphasizes interaction rather than action to produce best practice (Harris, 2020). Distributed leadership relies heavily on collective action and the involvement of everyone on the team (Azorín, 2020). Apart from being a team member who supports the leaders, the teachers should also develop the capacity to be professionals. Teachers should develop skills in using ICT in learning so that online learning can be more effective.

Regarding financial problems, teachers should also be able to develop learning that focuses on essential materials. In another sense, teachers should master and implement cost-saving emergency curricula. Table 2 presents the leadership of Islamic boarding schools in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

4.5. Implications

This study provides information regarding kyai, school principals, and teachers' strengths and weaknesses in implementing *pesantren* education during the "new normal" period and improving the education system's dimensions need special attention. The mapping of the "new normal" pesantren's strengths and weaknesses is summarized in Table 3.

The Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Religion can take advantage of the shortcomings and mistakes that have been made in the implementation of *pesantren* education in the "new normal" period and strategically design steps to improve the quality of safe and comfortable *pesantren* education for teachers and students. This study provides valuable information, suggestions, and recommendations for *pesantren* in other regions, including other countries with the same problems. Thus far, reports on how boarding schools around the world respond to COVID-19 seem sparse. Thus, all stakeholders, both domestic and foreign, especially the government and regional education offices throughout Indonesia, can take strategic steps in implementing education in boarding schools, in general, and in *pesantren* in particular during the

Table 2. Islamic boarding school leadership during the COVID-19 period.

Dimensions	Leader	Teacher
Policy	Distributing leadership	Expanding the network
Structural	Improving access to technology	Improving ICT skills
Social	Maintaining emotional stability	Providing consultation
Financial	Maintaining financial health	Implementing an emergency curriculum

"new normal" period. Based on the analysis of the *pesantren's* strengths and weaknesses, there are several scenarios for opening the *pesantren* in the "new normal" period, summarized in Table 4.

To support the success of *pesantren* education leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic, the government should provide support by adopting consistent policies and providing assistance. The first policy should include the willingness to adopt a comprehensive legal umbrella. The regulations should not only focus on specific scenarios and the handling of the return of students to the *pesantren*, as well as guidelines for "new normal" teaching and learning methods and processes in the *pesantren*, but there also need to be regulations on how to organize online learning in the *pesantren*, which is still considered difficult to do. The second policy should include setting up a special budget allocation for *pesantren*. The temporary budget allocation only includes medical personnel, medicines and vitamins, procurement of hand sanitizers, and medical cloth masks. So far, it has not touched on the provision of ICT facilities and training for teachers so that the *pesantren* can effectively implement blended learning. The third policy should be that the government implement the "new normal" pesantren and deploy personnel for physical and mental health education.

Another significant implication of the study's findings is the importance of distributed leadership. *Pesantren* leaders cannot act alone in responding and dealing with the very complex COVID-19 crisis. *Pesantren* leaders should realize that traditional leadership with a top-down approach is no longer sufficient to bring the *pesantren* out of the crisis and build resilience. The formation of a divisional team, tasked with coordinating with several local public authorities, shows that *pesantren* leaders should tap into teachers' collective leadership potential. *Pesantren* leadership should move away from the traditional leadership axis with a charismatic and authoritative approach toward distributed and collaborative leadership (Harris and Jones, 2020). In another sense, traditional leadership should be weakened and move toward flatter, networked leadership (Harris, 2011, 2013, 2020). With this leadership pattern, a solid team would be built with a highly collaborative culture, which, in turn, would improve decision-making (Kezar and Holcombe, 2017). Distributed leadership is the only path that should be taken to operate *pesantren* education services (Harris, 2020).

4.6. Limitations and recommendation

This study is open to some limitations. First, the study was conducted in the early days of the reopening of Islamic boarding schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused several impacts, namely the lack of leadership patterns that emerged, almost no *pesantren* had started learning in a "new normal" situation, and we had limited time in collecting data due to tight health protocols. Thus, this study only focused on one pilot *pesantren* that started learning in the "new normal" situation at the earliest opportunity in Malang, East Java, in a relatively short time. However, this research can guide future *pesantren* restarting educational services. Second, the interviews were conducted in Indonesian, while the presentation in this article has been in English. The word-for-word translation of the interviews may change certain meanings that could weaken the research findings. Third, one of our field researchers is a teacher at the *pesantren*, and it is possible that his presence during data collection influenced the participants' responses. Finally, there is a paucity of research on educational leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in Islamic boarding schools. This lack of research limits the research literature review, although this exploratory research may contribute new knowledge to fill this gap.

Although this study has succeeded in exploring the leadership patterns of *pesantren* education during the pandemic, aspects related to students' learning, when learning from home, have not been taken back to the *pesantren* since many issues remain unresolved. As it is the dimension with the most difficulties, in the future, further research needs to be carried out to investigate the types of activities that teachers can provide, the number of jobs, the availability of resources, and the

Table 3. Mapping of strengths and weaknesses of *pesantren*.

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Internal	Students' strong desire, parents, and *kyai* for their students immediately return to the *pesantren* because the total termination of *pesantren* activities can make students suffer academically.	Many students with limited facilities make it difficult for the *pesantren* to implement strict health protocols and implement online learning.
External	Increased community compliance in implementing health protocols and significant support from various stakeholders to return to the *pesantren*.	There has been no significant reduction in the spread of COVID-19; even most areas in East Java are still in the orange and red zone (high transmission rate). Also, there is no vaccine for COVID-19.

Table 4. Scenarios for opening *pesantren* during the new normal period.

Consideration	Scenario			
	1	2	3	4
Health protocol facilities	No	No	Complete	Complete
Online learning facilities and resources	No	Complete	Complete	Complete
The level of spread of COVID-19 in areas where Islamic boarding schools are located	High	High	High	Low
Support from parents, local residents, and stakeholders	Yes/No	Yes/No	Yes	Yes
Recommendation	Postponed	Online learning	Opened gradually	Opened

pedagogical skills of parents. Moreover, as Harris and Jones (2020) described, leading schools during the COVID-19 pandemic requires leaders who prioritize their members' health and well-being. Thus, further research is needed to explore how *pesantren* leaders and teachers perform self-care and emotional care to avoid feelings of anxiety and frustration. This research has succeeded in understanding the leadership traits and unique attributes that school leaders need to deal with the COVID-19 crisis in a broader sense. Also, what has not been discussed is how to develop these leadership attributes and skills for *pesantren* leaders and teachers during and after the pandemic. This is a major strategic challenge for *pesantren* and one that requires immediate attention.

5. Conclusion

This pandemic has awakened education stakeholders, especially *kyai*, school principals, and *pesantren* teachers, to pay attention to the importance of building a robust education system under pressure and urgency during a health and economic crisis. We should learn from this difficult situation and use it as a bridge and an opportunity to rethink, improve, and strengthen the education system. *Pesantren* leaders have shown good practice in making decisions related to protecting teachers and students from the dangers of COVID-19. They have even prepared the *pesantren* to face school closures for the second time if there is an increase in positive cases of COVID-19.

Based on the research questions, three conclusions were drawn: (1) *pesantren* leaders have so far conducted themselves quite well in terms of providing social and financial support to students and parents. In short, the results of the discussion with the moderated focus group are described as follows: All respondents agreed that a crucial problem is the dimensions of the structure and teaching of *pesantren* in the "new normal." Some reasons include weak internet support, lack of modern devices, flawed teaching methodology, and low teacher ICT skills. (2) through pesantren leadership examples in this paper, we have explored how strong educational leaders can thrive the pandemic. During this pandemic, *pesantren* will develop positively under a leader who shares leadership, collaborates, and networks increase student and teacher access to technology, maintains the emotional stability of students and parents, and maintains the financial health of the *pesantren*. (3) Lastly, we recommend the strategic role that teachers can play to assist *pesantren*

leaders during and after this pandemic by providing reliable field data regarding parent and student responses, expanding collaboration networks with other institutions, improving skills in the use of technology, increasing the mastery of emergency curricula, ensuring the implementation of strict health protocols, and providing services to students and parents who need extra support.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Yusuf Hanafi: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Wrote the paper.

Ahmad Taufiq: Conceived and designed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Wrote the paper.

Muhammad Saefi: Conceived and designed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Wrote the paper.

M. Alifudin Ikhsan: Conceived and designed the experiments; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Wrote the paper.

Tsania Nur Diyana: Conceived and designed the experiments; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Wrote the paper.

Titis Thoriquttyas: Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Performed the experiments; Wrote the paper.

Faris Khoirul Anam: Conceived and designed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Wrote the paper.

Data availability statement

Data included in article.

Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

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