Habitus and Change: Phenomenological Insights into Curriculum Adaptation in Indonesian Islamic Schools

Eka Rizki Amalia[1]**, Muhammad Yuliansyah**[2] **Yhasinta Agustyarini**[3] **Muqimah Liwais Sunnah**[4]**, Juli Amaliya Nasucha**[5] **Nurul Azizah Ria Kusrini**[6]
Curtin University, Australia[1]
Universitas Islam Kalimantan Muhammad Arsyad Al Banjari Banjarmasin[2]
Universitas KH Abdul Chalim Mojokerto, Indonesia[1,3,4,5,6]
Email correspondence: ekarizki.amalia@postgrad.curtin.edu.au

Abstract

Indonesia's education system is undergoing a significant transformation with the introduction of a new curriculum. This shift presents unique challenges for Islamic schools (*madrasahs*), where school leaders must reconcile national education goals with religious principles, all while navigating systemic constraints and limited resources. This study uses Bourdieu's theoretical framework to examine how Heads of Curriculum (HoCs) respond to these challenges through their leadership strategies. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study investigates the lived experiences of six HoCs from different *madrasahs* through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis, grounded in Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus*, *field*, and *capital*, reveals how internal dispositions and systemic influences shape leadership behaviour. The findings show that the HoCs developed adaptive strategies that reflect key themes: leadership and adaptability, resourcefulness and social capital, balancing Islamic values with reform objectives, and navigating policy disparities. These strategies highlight how *habitus*, shaped by cultural, professional, and systemic experiences, guides leadership practices that balance tradition with modern reform. Ultimately, the study offers valuable empirical insights into curriculum reform in Islamic education and extends Bourdieu's framework by integrating cultural and religious contexts, showing how school leaders convert structural limitations into opportunities for institutional growth.

Keywords: Bourdieu's *Habitus*, Curriculum Reform, Islamic Schools (*madrasahs*), Leadership Strategies.

Abstrak

Sistem pendidikan Indonesia sedang mengalami transformasi besar melalui penerapan kurikulum baru. Perubahan ini menimbulkan tantangan tersendiri bagi sekolah-sekolah Islam (madrasah), di mana para pemimpin sekolah harus menyeimbangkan antara tujuan pendidikan nasional dan prinsip-prinsip keagamaan, sembari menghadapi keterbatasan sistemik dan sumber daya. Studi ini menggunakan kerangka teori Bourdieu untuk menganalisis bagaimana para Wakil Kepala Bidang Kurikulum (HoC) merespons tantangan tersebut melalui strategi kepemimpinan mereka. Dengan pendekatan fenomenologis kualitatif, penelitian ini menggali pengalaman hidup enam HoC dari madrasah yang berbeda melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur. Analisis tematik yang didasarkan pada konsep habitus, field, dan capital dari Bourdieu mengungkap bagaimana disposisi internal dan pengaruh sistemik membentuk perilaku kepemimpinan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa para HoC mengembangkan strategi adaptif yang mencerminkan tema-tema utama: kepemimpinan dan adaptabilitas, kecakapan serta modal sosial, penyeimbangan nilai-nilai Islam dengan tujuan reformasi, dan penyesuaian terhadap ketimpangan kebijakan. Strategi-strategi ini menyoroti bagaimana habitus, yang dibentuk oleh pengalaman budaya,

profesional, dan sistemik, mengarahkan praktik kepemimpinan yang mampu menjembatani tradisi dengan pembaruan modern. Pada akhirnya, studi ini memberikan wawasan empiris yang berharga mengenai reformasi kurikulum dalam pendidikan Islam, sekaligus memperluas kerangka Bourdieu dengan mengintegrasikan konteks budaya dan keagamaan, serta menunjukkan bagaimana pemimpin sekolah mengubah keterbatasan struktural menjadi peluang pertumbuhan kelembagaan.

Kata Kunci: *Habitus, Reformasi Kurikulum, Sekolah Islam (madrasah), Strategi Kepemimpinan*

INTRODUCTION

This study explores how Heads of Curriculum (HoCs) in Indonesian Islamic schools respond to recent education reforms by using the theoretical lens of Pierre Bourdieu. It applies three central ideas from Bourdieu's sociological framework of habitus, capital, and field to understand the leadership behaviours and decision-making processes of HoCs. *Habitus* refers to the ingrained dispositions, actions, and perceptions that are shaped by an individual's cultural background, religious beliefs, and professional experiences (Bourdieu, 1990; Swartz, 2012). *Capital* includes resources such as knowledge, relationships, status, and financial support that HoCs can use to support curriculum change (Bourdieu, 1986). The *field* represents the broader environment in which HoCs work, shaped by government policy, Islamic traditions, and the conditions of local schools (Bourdieu, 1998b). This framework allows this study to investigate how HoCs manage the demands of a national curriculum reform while staying true to Islamic educational values.

Indonesia's education system is currently undergoing major changes to respond to globalization, technological advancements, and social challenges. A key part of this reform is the Kurikulum Merdeka (KM), also called the Independent Curriculum or Curriculum of Freedom. KM was designed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and encourages more flexible, student-centered, and competency-based learning (Kemdikbudristek, 2023). The curriculum aims to develop 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and independence, shifting away from rote memorization and standardized tests (Azizah, 2023; Langoday, 2024; Reza, 2023). This represents a significant transformation in how education is delivered and understood in Indonesia.

Despite these ambitions, many problems remain, especially regarding how the curriculum is applied in schools. According to the 2022 PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), Indonesia ranked 74th out of 79 countries in literacy and science (OECD, 2022), highlighting a large gap between policy and practice. Additional studies confirm that teachers face many difficulties when applying KM in classrooms, such as limited resources, lack of training, and confusion about its goals (Jasiah et al., 2024; Masbukhin, 2023). These problems are especially serious in Islamic schools (*madrasahs*), which serve a large portion of Indonesia's 87% Muslim population (BPS-Statistics Indonesia, 2023). For KM to succeed and contribute to national equity, it must be meaningfully integrated into the *madrasah* system. Without proper adaptation, students in *madrasahs* may miss out on key competencies that are vital for participation in global society, all while trying to preserve their religious commitments.

Madrasahs occupy a unique position where they must balance national educational standards with Islamic values (Amalia et al., 2024; Legistia, 2019; Warapsari et al., 2023). Their role is to develop students who are both religiously grounded and prepared to face modern challenges (Abdullah, 2017; Nadiva, 2023). The introduction of KM brings both opportunities and challenges to these schools, particularly because implementing competency-based education means integrating secular reform ideas with deep-rooted cultural and spiritual norms. This balancing act places a special responsibility on school leaders, especially HoCs, who must lead change while managing resource limitations, teacher readiness, and community expectations (Pamuji & Mawardi, 2023; Qomaruzzaman, 2018; Utami & Suswanto, 2022)

In this context, Bourdieu's idea of habitus is essential for understanding how HoCs approach reform. Their personal and professional background, including religious studies, teaching experience, and social roles, shapes how they interpret reform, where they focus their energy, and

whether they support or resist change (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu, 1998; Swartz, 2012). For instance, some HoCs may favour collective decision-making aligned with Islamic values of collaboration (Agbenyega & Asiam, 2023; Bagley & Hillyard, 2019; Gunter & Forrester, 2010), while others may emphasize moral and character education as central goals (Rasyid et al., 2022; Sobri et al., 2023). These choices reflect deeper patterns formed by the contexts in which leaders have been shaped.

Alongside habitus, the ideas of capital and field provide further insight. In the context of this study, *economic capital* involves funding and school facilities (Adeoye et al., 2024; Farid et al., 2024); *cultural capital* includes Islamic knowledge and teaching skills (Rafik, 2024; Setiawan, 2024; Yosef, 2022); *social capital* refers to relationships with staff, policymakers, and other stakeholders (Sullanmaa et al., 2021); and *symbolic capital* covers status, recognition, and legitimacy within the community (Shymko et al., 2023; Vu & Do, 2021). The way HoCs use these forms of capital depends on their position in the field (Bourdieu, 1998a), shaped by government priorities, religious expectations, and local norms.

According to the government (Kemdikbud, 2022), KM introduces innovations designed to improve learning through flexibility and student-centered methods. While this gives *madrasahs* room to adapt the curriculum to fit their values, it also presents difficulties. HoCs are expected to implement reform while maintaining Islamic integrity, often in contexts where schools have limited support. These challenges are most intense in rural areas and poorly funded schools, where differences in infrastructure, access to technology, and teacher quality create serious obstacles (Pratiwi et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2022).

Although leadership in *madrasahs* and education reform in Indonesia has been studied (Ainissyifa et al., 2024; Syakur, 2024; Utami & Suswanto, 2022; Warapsari et al., 2023), few studies focus on the *habitus* of HoCs, that is, how their beliefs, experiences, and values shape their responses to curriculum reform. Much of the existing research concentrates on general leadership roles (Buchori et al., 2024; Juhji et al., 2025; Mulyadi & Sobri, 2024; Solichah, 2024; Sugeng et al., 2024; Wahib, 2024) or bureaucratic constraints (Fathurrochman et al., 2021; Mahfud, 2019) but gives little attention to the deeper motivations and dispositions of curriculum leaders within Islamic settings. Applying Bourdieu's framework helps to fill this gap by revealing how HoCs operate at the intersection of leadership, religious identity, and educational change.

In Indonesian schools, HoCs have a clear and specialized role. They are responsible for leading all curriculum matters and often represent the principal in this area. Their position is crucial to translating national reforms into school practices. This study, therefore, aims to explore how habitus and field interact to shape the HoCs' experiences with KM. In that regard, this study aims to answer the research question: How do Heads of Curriculum (HoCs) in Indonesian Islamic schools navigate the implementation of the new curriculum (KM), and how does their *habitus* shape leadership practices in balancing curriculum reform with Islamic and national educational goals?

METHOD

The study employs a qualitative phenomenological design enriched by Bourdieu's sociological framework to examine the lived experiences of Heads of Curriculum (HoCs) in Indonesian Islamic state schools (*madrasahs*) as they implement the new KM curriculum. Phenomenology facilitates an in-depth understanding of how HoCs interpret and navigate educational reform, while Bourdieu's constructs—*habitus*, *field*, and *capital*—offer insight into the social and structural forces shaping their decisions. This dual-framework allows researchers to explore how individual agency, informed by professional and religious dispositions, interacts with institutional constraints to influence leadership practices. Figure 1, the Framework of Integrated Phenomenological-Sociological Leadership, visually synthesizes these interactions by mapping the subjective experiences of HoCs within their broader socio-educational fields.
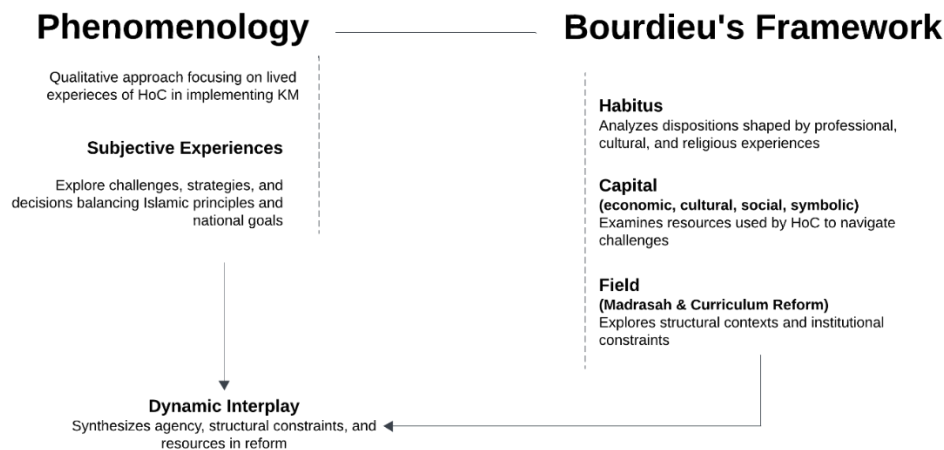
Figure 1. The Framework of Integrated Phenomenological-Sociological Leadership (Bourdieu, 1986; Creswell & Poth, 2016)

The study was conducted across six madrasahs representing urban and rural Indonesia to capture a wide range of demographic and institutional conditions. Six HoCs, each from a different school, were purposively selected based on their curriculum reform experience. Their backgrounds demonstrate a rich layering of cultural and professional influences; most are affiliated with prominent Islamic organizations (Nahdlatul Ulama or Muhammadiyah) and have over a decade of teaching experience. Despite lacking formal leadership training, these individuals developed adaptive leadership approaches through mentorship and experiential learning. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants and their demographic attributes. The study thus examines how their embedded values—such as religious duty and community leadership shape their approach to balancing Islamic principles with national educational mandates.

Table 1. The participants, Heads of Curriculum (HoC)

Name (pseudonym)	School/ *madrasah*	Gender
Arum	School 1	Female
Azis	School 2	Male
Ella	School 3	Female
Yunus	School 4	Male
Iin	School 5	Female
Rafiq	School 6	Male

Data were collected over six months through semi-structured interviews and analysis of institutional documents, allowing for triangulation that strengthens credibility. Thematic analysis, informed by (Braun & Clarke, 2012) and guided by Bourdieu's framework, was used to identify patterns in the participants' narratives. The iterative process involved coding data in NVivo using both inductive and deductive approaches. Key themes, such as the reconciliation of Islamic values with reform goals and the strategic use of social capital, were analyzed through the lens of *habitus*, *field*, and *capital*. Figure 2 illustrates the analytical framework that integrates thematic analysis with Bourdieu's sociological theory. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, document triangulation, and reflexive journaling, all of which contributed to a nuanced and reliable portrayal of how HoCs experience and respond to the complexities of KM implementation.
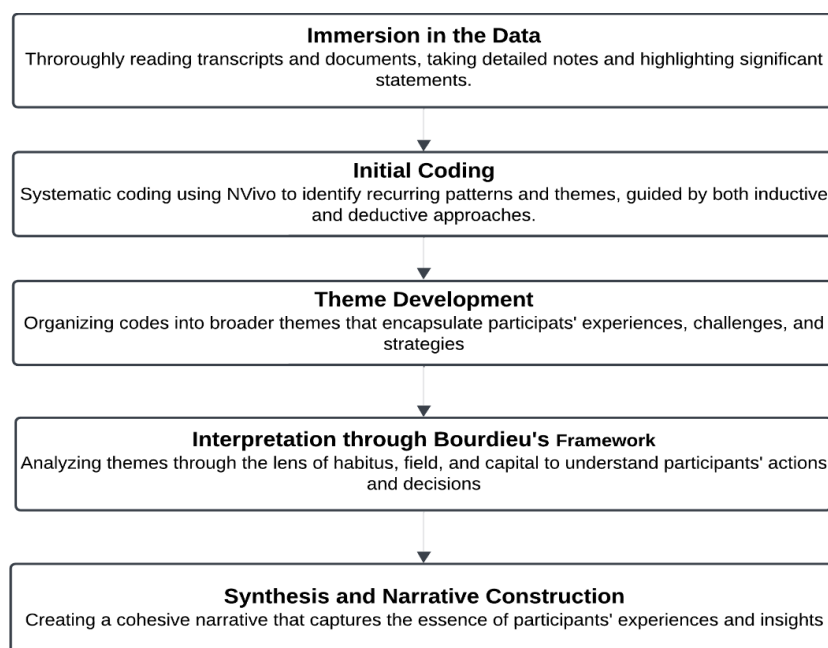
Figure 2. Data Analysis Framework: Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) informed by Bourdieu's concept of *Habitus*, *Capital*, and *Field* (Bourdieu, 1986)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Using Bourdieu's framework of *habitus*, this analysis evaluates the themes emerging from the HoCs' comments. The concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1990) informs their perceptions, strategies, and actions in response to the new curriculum, KM. Bourdieu's related concepts of *field* and *capital* are also incorporated to examine how structural and relational dynamics influence their leadership practices.

Table 2 below presents the NVivo coding structure generated during data analysis, highlighting key themes and subthemes alongside the frequency of references coded from participants' narratives.

Table 2. NVivo Coding

Parent Node (Theme)	Child Node (Subtheme)	Participants	Estimated Number of References
Leadership and Adaptability	Cautious Compliance	Rafiq, Azis	12
	Proactive Innovation and Pragmatic Problem-Solving	Arum, Ella, Azis	10
Resourcefulness and Social Capital	External Networking	Arum, Yunus	11
	Peer Collaboration (MGMP reliance)	Iin	9
Balancing Islamic Values with Reform Objectives	Embedding Islamic Values into P5 Projects	Arum, Rafiq, Ella	10
Navigating Policy Disparities	Pragmatic Improvisation	Yunus, Arum	8
	Creative Autonomy	Azis, Iin	7

Leadership and Adaptability

The participants demonstrate how their *habitus,* shaped by institutional demands, cultural norms, and systemic constraints, affects their leadership styles. Arum's remark below illustrates a leadership approach that seeks to maintain institutional legitimacy while ensuring practical preparedness. She stated:

> *This was why we chose to implement Level 2 Mandiri Berubah and use whatever resources were available from the government [MoNE]. We did not have specific training back then, and we did not feel confident enough to choose Level 3. But we decided to go ahead and invite a government representative to explain KM. (Arum, School 1)*

Arum's leadership represents a balance between systemic constraints and proactive agency. Her cautious decision to proceed with Level 2 of the curriculum rather than Level 3 reflects a *habitus* shaped by structural limitations, aligning with the need to maintain institutional credibility while avoiding overreach. Within the *madrasah* context, the responsibility for implementing the curriculum is shared between the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology—hereafter referred to in this study as the Ministry of National Education (MoNE). *Madrasahs* are required to follow the KM guidelines issued by MoRA for religious subjects, while for general subjects (such as English, Mathematics, Science, and Bahasa Indonesia), they should refer to the standards published by the MoNE. At the time of the curriculum transition, Arum's institution faced a delay in receiving detailed technical guidance from MoRA. Consequently, to avoid stagnation, she strategically invited a representative from MoNE to provide direct explanations on the KM implementation. Her leadership thus demonstrates a pragmatic balancing act, mobilizing *cultural* and *social capital* to manage institutional constraints while adhering to the evolving national standards.

Corroborating Arum's balance of caution and agency, Azis's approach further highlights a pragmatic *habitus* that emphasizes progress through gradual steps while adapting to systemic uncertainties. He commented:

> *The principal's consideration was that it is better to learn as we progress rather than keep learning without taking action. Anyway, in KM, there are three levels: Independent Learning, Independent Transition, and Independent Sharing. We selected the level that best suits our current circumstances. (Azis, School 2)*

Referring to the government's website (Kemdikbud, 2022), KM implementation consists of three levels: Level 1, *Mandiri Belajar* (Independent Learning): educational institutions implement some aspects and principles of KM without replacing their current curriculum; Level 2, *Mandiri Berubah* (Independent Transformation): educational institutions adopt KM in more comprehensive ways by adapting certain teaching tools provided by MoNE; and Level 3, *Mandiri Berbagi* (Independent Sharing): at this stage, educational institutions not only fully implement KM, they also share successful practices and experiences with other schools.

Azis's leadership style, as evidenced by his comment, reflects a pragmatic approach to operating within systemic constraints. His choice to "learn as we progress" instead of waiting until they are fully ready shows how the practical realities of implementing KM have formed his *habitus*. Azis navigates competing demands for action and preparation and ensures that he is making progress without overwhelming his organization by choosing the pathway that matches his institution's means and capabilities at that time. This flexibility demonstrates that Azis's *habitus* prioritizes institutional progress rather than perfection, showing the importance of preserving momentum even in the face of systemic uncertainties. His approach highlights a sense of agency, one that allows for exercising adaptability within the limits of the structural options. Azis's focus on gradual progress through a path aligned with the resources and conditions his school faces illustrates a more systemic approach to leadership, working to establish it with consideration for system complexity and a focus on future continuous improvement.

While Azis focuses on the pragmatic idea of maintaining progress amidst systemic uncertainties, Ella emphasizes innovation. This highlights how HoCs adapt their *habitus* not only to internal constraints but also to external competitive pressures to sustain institutional trust and relevance. Ella, HoC from School 3, commented, *"We need to prioritize innovation, as numerous private madrasahs in the area present strong competition. Without improving our quality, we risk losing the community's trust."* Ella's leadership is associated with a *habitus* formed of competition, especially in regions with a strong presence of private *madrasah*s. Her commitment to raising the educational standards enables her *madrasah* to remain trusted and preferred from the stakeholders' point of view. This competitive *habitus* reinforces Ella's focus on innovation to distinguish her *madrasah* from others. She exhibits a responsive form of leadership by balancing the requirements of fulfilling community expectations. Ella's ability to navigate this competitive environment reflects a leadership disposition attuned to the dynamic interplay of institutional reputation and external pressures, emphasizing the proactive dimension of her *habitus* in sustaining *madrasah*'s position in a competitive field.

While Ella focuses on innovation, Rafiq, HoC from School 6, focuses on a balanced approach by emphasizing progress despite uncertainty. He said, *"We followed the guidance of the Regional Office despite lingering confusion. Taking the first step is better than waiting too long."* Rafiq's comment indicates a *habitus* of cautious action that balances compliance and the need for institutional progress. Despite the confusion, Rafiq expresses dedication to meeting bureaucratic requirements by engaging in dialogue with the stakeholders and following the guidance of the Regional Office. This compliance aligns with the understanding of the structural demands of *madrasah*s and the benefits of complying with the top-down directive to maintain institutional credibility. Rafiq's insistence on "taking the first step" illustrates an actionable way to encounter inertia, emphasizing gradual improvements instead of seeking flawless outcomes. Such a dual strategy reflects a *habitus* formed by the necessity to navigate uncertainties while ensuring the responsiveness of his institution to the change objectives. Rafiq's leadership reflects a pragmatic balance between structure and agency, one in which the application of guidelines exists closely with an orientation toward action and improvement.

Resourcefulness and Social Capital

Participants leverage informal networks, collaboration, and ingenuity to navigate resource and guidance gaps, reflecting a *habitus* of self-reliance and communal problem-solving, as reflected in Arum's account, *"We cannot rely solely on MoRA. Instead, we often learn from schools under MoNE. To deepen our understanding, we invited a speaker from a state public high school with prior expertise in KM to share his experiences with us (Arum, School 1).* Arum's comment reveals a *habitus* of resourcefulness that highlights her capacity to draw on external networks to undermine her institution's limitations. Realizing that MoRA alone was not sufficient, Arum sought help from schools under the MoNE's administration, as they already have more extensive experience regarding KM. To address this gap and build capacity within her *madrasah*, Arum invited a speaker from a state public high school to share knowledge through a workshop. Arum's willingness to consult for deeper expertise outside her institutional area reveals a *habitus* open to innovation and relational *capital*. Her approach highlights how leaders can navigate systemic deficiencies by drawing on broader professional networks by ensuring that their institutions remain aligned with evolving curriculum demands while fostering a culture of learning and adaptability.

Arum's proactive use of external expertise to address institutional gaps mirrors Yunus's strategy of drawing on MoNE's advanced experience with KM to compensate for delayed guidance from MoRA. Yunus (HoC, School 4) recounted, *"When there was no technical guidance from MoRA, we learned from MoNE. They had a head start in implementing KM, so we benefit from their experience."* Yunus's approach reflects a *habitus* rooted in practical problem-solving and adaptability. Not having technical support from MoRA, Yunus and his colleagues searched for knowledge and resources from MoNE, which had experience with KM. Yunus's decision reflects

his resourcefulness in addressing systemic limitations by leveraging cross-sectoral collaborations to fill the gaps created by his institutional framework. Yunus's approach also shows his willingness to be decisive by enlisting the help of external expertise to ensure that his *madrasah* keeps pace with educational reforms. Such inter-sectoral engagement exemplifies a *habitus* with resilience and a proactive disposition. Yunus's ability to seek out and adapt resources outside his immediate institutional context is indicative of his emphasis on pragmatism and innovation. This approach not only mitigates the limitations of delayed guidance but also fosters an openness to collaboration across different educational domains.

Yunus's use of external expertise parallels Iin's reliance on MGMP collaboration, both reflecting a *habitus* of adaptability through strategic networking. Iin (HoC, School 5) narrated, "*We rely on MGMP to align perceptions, especially for cross-subject projects. Without it, achieving agreement among teachers would be challenging.*" Iin's leadership exemplifies a communal *habitus* shaped by collaboration and collective problem-solving. Her reliance on the MGMP (Subject Teacher Association or Working Group) to align teachers' views, especially for projects spanning multiple subjects, underlines the role of peer networks in creating consensus and common understanding. This approach shows her understanding of the structural realities of asking teachers to work together on interdisciplinary projects, which can have negative consequences as teachers bring their different viewpoints within themselves. It also underlines the community involvement in addressing these challenges, emphasizing MGMP's role. Her dependence on the local networks proves to be a *habitus* tuned to the relational network of her institution. Iin's approach demonstrates the power of collective agency to address challenges of resources and coordination and reflects her ability to foster cohesion among her staff.

Balancing Islamic Values with Reform Objectives

This theme explores how participants embed Islamic values into KM while aligning with reform-driven objectives. Their comments reflect a *habitus* that balances religious traditions with the demands of a modern, standardized education system. Arum's approach below exemplifies a *habitus* deeply rooted in Islamic values while adapting to the demands of modern educational reforms. She said:

> *We ensure that Islamic values are reflected in P5 projects. For example, in a project with the theme of sustainability, we planted plants and assigned students to care for them as a practice in environmental responsibility. We explained that protecting the environment is an integral part of Islamic teachings, as emphasized in a* hadith *about the importance of preserving nature. This way, students not only learn about sustainability but also understand that it is a form of worship. (Arum, School 1)*

One of the pivotal components of KM is the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), which focuses on cultivating student character according to *Pancasila* (foundational philosophy of Indonesia) values (Kemdikbudristek, 2023). Structured around principles of project-based learning, among other things, P5 delivers on its focus on students' social competencies and character, rather than solely on scores and grades. By incorporating Islamic teachings into P5 projects like sustainability initiatives, Arum views environmental responsibility as not simply a tangible skill but also as a spiritual endeavour. By quoting a *hadith* (an eyewitness account of a saying or action of Prophet Muhammad) to emphasize the need to sustain nature, she promotes the synergy between Islamic values and global priorities. As a result, students are able to perceive their activities as not only educational outcomes but also acts of worship, thus forming a bond between their faith and their learning. This practice reflects a *habitus* that bridges tradition and reform, highlighting Arum's ability to balance the dual imperatives of religious identity and curriculum objectives.

Arum's focus on Islamic values in education aligns with Rafiq's use of the concept of *Rahmatan Lil Alamin* to promote tolerance and moral growth. He said:

> *In the Rahmatan Lil Alamin project, we emphasize fostering tolerance and practicing Islamic values in a practical way. One of our activities involves inviting students to participate in discussions about diversity.*

> *We aim for the students to understand that Islamic teachings are a blessing for all, not just for Muslims. This approach allows us to teach tolerance directly, in alignment with the P5 framework. (Rafiq, School 6)*

Rahmatan Lil Alamin is an additional concept to P5, particularly implemented in *madrasah*. Based on the comments, Rafiq's approach shows a *habitus* for Islamic values, placing *rahmatan lil alamin* (a blessing for all creation) as one of the roots of tolerance and coexistence. Through incorporating diversity discussions that cover topics from different religions, Rafiq exposes his students directly to the core principles of mutual respect and understanding. This practice is aligned with the P5 framework that focuses on character development and social harmony. Rafiq further reinforces Islamic universality and inclusivity by integrating these conversations with a broader framework of Islamic teachings. Such an approach underlines how Rafiq manages to harmonize religious identity with contemporary educational reforms, combining the essence of Islamic values with practical application. His focus on experiential learning, where learners practice tolerance in the real world, is reflective of a *habitus* that responds to a need to bridge tradition with modernity.

Rafiq's emphasis on practical applications of Islamic values for fostering tolerance complements Ella's effort to align faith with curriculum goals by embedding Islamic principles into P5 themes, as expressed in the following comment:

> *We ensure that every P5 theme is aligned with Islamic values to avoid any conflict with the national curriculum. For instance, the religious-aligned theme is connected to the importance of* sabar [*patience*], Ikhlas [*sincerity*], *and* tawakal [*trust in God*] *as taught in Islam. We also involve religious education teachers to ensure these values are comprehensively integrated into learning activities. (Ella, School 3)*

Ella's approach demonstrates a *habitus* informed by Islamic values within a contested space of the reform of modernity. Aligning the P5 themes with Islamic values of patience (*sabar*), sincerity (*ikhlas*), and trust in God (tawakal), she connects religious teachings to national curriculum objectives. This ensures that the learning experience is morally robust and spiritual, whilst preserving the *madrasah*'s identity. Involving religious education teachers further ensures a collaborative and comprehensive integration of values. Ella's efforts highlight how Islamic principles can guide students' moral development while meeting reform objectives, blending tradition with modernity in a responsive leadership style.

Navigating Policy Disparities

Participants discuss how systemic delays, conflicting directives, and uneven implementation have forced them to improvise, adapt, and create localized solutions. Their *habits* reflect resilience in navigating these structural challenges.

> *The book [curriculum guidelines] was released in August 2022, but only arrived in November. Consequently, we had to start without a clear guide. We ended up creating our own materials, referencing K13 while adapting them to KM's concepts. When the official materials finally arrived, we found they were not significantly different, which gave us confidence in the materials we had developed ourselves. (Arum, School 1)*

Arum's comment reflects a *habitus* formed from resilience and resourcefulness, which enables her to navigate systemic delays in a timely manner. Confronted with late-arriving official materials, she drew on experience with the previous 2013 Curriculum (K13) to produce temporary resources that matched KM's principles. This forward-thinking highlights her ability to be innovative and take initiative in the absence of institutional guidance. Arum was able to progress with implementation without official guidelines by relating the familiar structures to new requirements. Seeing little difference between the material she and her team developed themselves and the official materials of KM is a huge validation for her and shows how confident she is that her team can solve problems on their own. This illustrates a *habitus* of resilience and creative problem-solving, where institutional knowledge and practical skills make up for systemic failings. Her approach to turning delays into opportunities for self-reliance is a

testament to her pragmatic and forward-thinking leadership style, which ensures progress even in the face of structural inefficiencies.

Arum's adaptability parallels Azis's method in addressing unclear guidance to ensure progress. Azis asserted:

> *P5 has its report form, but there is no standardized model yet. At first, we were quite confused, especially since there were no examples provided by MoRA. Eventually, we sought a format from MoNE and modified it to suit our needs. This approach was helpful, but questions remain about whether our model fully aligns with the intended standards. (Azis, School 2)*

Azis 's approach reflects a *habitus* of creative autonomy that allows him to pair his work to search for directives or standardized tools. At the initial stage of KM implementation, School 2 did not receive a complete guideline of the standardized model for the P5. Later, MoRA launched P5PPRA, the Project to Strengthen the Profile of Pancasila Students and *Rahmatan Lil 'Alamin*. P5PPRA is implemented in *madrasahs*, aiming to develop students' character by integrating Pancasila values. The program incorporates 10 religious moderation values, including *taadub* (politeness), *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawazun* (balance), and *qudwah* (exemplary conduct), through thematic projects in curricular and extracurricular activities (Direktorat KSKK Madrasah, 2022).

Amidst the unclear guidelines, instead of letting this ambiguity interrupt progress, Azis called on resources available from MoNE and, in doing so, showed an impressive capacity to co-opt frameworks and facilities available to him, ultimately serving as a basis for local adaptation. His adaptation of these templates to the particular context of his *madrasah* shows a practical, innovative problem-solving mentality. This cleverness is also a testament to Azis's awareness of the necessity of a balance between compliance and innovation. Even though his work offered a usable solution, his questions over alignment with expected standards reveal a thoughtful and prudent element of his leadership. His actions reflect a *habitus* that values progress and self-reliance while remaining attuned to institutional expectations. By bridging policy gaps through external collaboration and localized adjustments, Azis ensures that his *madrasah* can meet reform demands despite systemic ambiguities.

Azis's creative autonomy in adapting external frameworks aligns with Iin's balanced approach of tailoring national guidelines to local needs, both reflecting a *habitus* that combines innovation with compliance to address systemic ambiguities. Iin narrated, *"We created our version while still following KM guidelines. For example, for P5, we developed indicators tailored to madrasah while still referring to the national guidelines. So, we were not entirely independent, but we also didn't just sit and wait" (Iin, School 5)*. Iin's comment illustrates a leadership *habitus* that balances institutional compliance with culturally grounded innovation. As she explained, her *madrasah*, situated in a district strongly influenced by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), a prominent Islamic organization, adapted the nationally mandated P5 theme of sustainability through a localized project called *Santri Menanam*, in which students cultivated medicinal herbs commonly used in *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) life, such as *kunyit* (turmeric) and *temulawak* (Java ginger). This not only addressed environmental responsibility but also reinforced values of *ikhtiar* (effort), *kemandirian* (self-reliance), and modest living, aligning the project with the religious ethics. In parallel, the school launched an original initiative titled *Madrasah Berbudi* (virtuous *madrasah*), aimed at fostering *akhlakul karimah* (noble character) through weekly community service, including cleaning the school's *musholla*, (prayer space) and engaging in reflective monthly *tahlilan* sessions, a communal religious gathering held to pray for a deceased person. While not directly outlined in the P5 modules, these activities embodied the *madrasah's* moral mission and enriched the official curriculum with spiritual and social values rooted in local Islamic identity. Her statement— "We were not completely independent, but we also didn't just sit and wait"—encapsulates a leadership style that fuses national expectations with bottom-up creativity, demonstrating how *habitus*, informed by religious-cultural capital, can shape responsive curriculum adaptation in faith-based schooling contexts.

To sum up the findings section, Table 3 details the leadership strategies adopted by Heads of Curriculum (HoCs) in response to the demands of implementing KM. Drawing on Bourdieu's theoretical lens, the table connects their actions with key sociocultural dispositions and institutional constraints, highlighting how *habitus* and *capital* intersect within the *field* of educational reform.

Table 3. Leadership strategies among *madrasah* leaders (Heads of Curriculum) in implementing the new curriculum

Theme	Leadership Approaches and Strategies	Bourdieusian Lens	Participants (HoCs)
Leadership and Adaptability	Exercising cautious compliance and calculated progress under uncertainty. Leaders selectively implement KM (e.g., Level 2) based on institutional readiness, using step-by-step adaptation to manage systemic constraints.	*Habitus* shaped by structural realities; field awareness of institutional limitations and expectations; *symbolic capital* linked to credibility and trust.	Arum (School 1), Azis (School 2), Rafiq (School 6), Ella (School 3)
Resourcefulness and Social Capital	Utilizing informal networks, peer support (MGMP), and cross-institutional collaborations (e.g., MoNE schools) to compensate for lack of guidance from MoRA. These leaders initiate external support and foster communal learning cultures.	*Social capital* through professional relationships; *cultural capital* in identifying relevant knowledge; *habitus* marked by innovation and self-reliance.	Arum (School 1), Yunus (School 4), Iin (School 5)
Balancing Islamic Values with Reform Objectives	Embedding Islamic principles (e.g., sustainability as worship, tolerance through *Rahmatan Lil Alamin*) into KM components such as P5 projects. Aligning national reform with moral-spiritual development.	*Habitus* rooted in religious-cultural identity; *symbolic capital* from upholding Islamic legitimacy while meeting reform goals.	Arum (School 1), Rafiq (School 6), Ella (School 3)
Navigating Policy Disparities	Responding to delayed materials, unclear reporting formats, and inconsistent guidance by developing internal resources (e.g., report forms, local materials) or borrowing adaptable models from MoNE.	*Field* marked by a fragmented policy context; creative *habitus* shaped by reform ambiguity; *cultural* and *social capital* enable local adaptation.	Arum (School 1), Yunus (School 4), Azis (School 2), Iin (School 5)

Discussion

This discussion section examines the strategies employed by the Heads of Curriculum (HoC) in navigating systemic challenges, fostering institutional resilience, and aligning reforms with religious, local and cultural circumstances. Across diverse contexts, the interplay of leadership adaptability, resourcefulness, and social capital, as well as the integration of Islamic values with reform objectives and navigating policy disparities, emerges as central to addressing institutional demands.

For Arum, her strategic decision to implement a lower level of KM has shown her pragmatic view on sustaining institutional credibility without overextending resources (Carvalho et al., 2021). Her dependency on external expertise in improving readiness while leveraging *cultural* and *social capital* also underlines the need to mobilize available resources when institutional constraints are met (Hartog & Belschak, 2012). This is a great example of how *habitus* is a practical synthesis of structure and agency, here in the form of a careful balance of cautious pragmatism and proactive initiative. In transforming constraints into opportunities, Arum mirrors the process identified by Shal (2024) as critical for making sense of systemic demands in transition-oriented educational contexts. Her leadership shows how adaptability can maintain institutional momentum even amid uncertainty.

Aziz's decision to tailor KM implementation to his institution's capacity similarly reflects his ability to evaluate readiness while pursuing broader reform objectives (Bilal et al., 2021; Chen-Levi et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2018; Mubarak et al., 2021). His approach underscores the importance of flexibility and responsiveness in leadership (Budhathoki, 2019; Kyalo et al., 2018), fostering a supportive work environment and enabling his team to manage systemic uncertainties effectively (Luturlean et al., 2019). Ella, by contrast, emphasizes innovation as a strategic response to external pressures. Her proactive approach balances community expectations with institutional reform while underscoring the symbolic value of institutional credibility as perceived by the local community (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Her leadership showcases a competitive *habitus* that preserves institutional relevance and differentiates her *madrasah* in a competitive educational landscape. Her capacity to sustain her institution's standing demonstrates a nuanced leadership approach attuned to the dynamic relationship between institutional reputation and external pressures (Schein, 2010; Shatzer et al., 2014).

Rafiq exemplifies a similar blend of flexibility and pragmatism in his leadership. His adherence to the directives from the Regional Office demonstrates an awareness of and sensitivity to bureaucratic expectations (Schembera & Haack, 2023). At the same time, his focus on "taking the first step" presents a willingness to take action that values progress over perfection. This mix of complying and innovating allows him to meet systemic needs while supporting institutional growth (Dar, 2021; Wang, 2024). These examples contribute to a picture of how leaders adjust the strategies they implement to maintain progress in complex educational environments.

Resourcefulness and collaboration become key mechanisms for addressing systemic challenges. An example of this is the choice to invite a state public high school speaker, which is a strategic approach leveraging external networks for information supplementation to internal knowledge gaps (Pulford et al., 2020). It shows how the HoCs can use their professional networks to enable alignment with the changing landscape of curriculum, which also encourages a mindset of lifelong learning (Koskela-Huotari & Vargo, 2016; Wang, 2021). In the same vein, Yunus' decision to seek support from MoNE also resonates with his attempts to address systemic gaps with cross-sectoral collaborations (Gunter & Forrester, 2010; Schein, 2010). By compensating for delays and limitations within his institutional framework, Yunus exemplifies the value of strategic partnerships in overcoming organizational challenges (Gao & Cui, 2022; Wang, 2022).

Iin's leadership underscores how communal *habitus* and collective problem-solving can help mitigate institutional demands (Bøje & Frederiksen, 2019). In a way, relying on the MGMP to keep teachers' perceptions balanced allows them to cultivate a clear sense of mission among the whole. By highlighting peer networks and shared agency, this model also engages institutional challenges in ways that emphasize shared responsibility, not individual domination (Bagley & Hillyard, 2019). Iin's method highlights community-driven solutions through complexity, the strength of collective effort and shared purpose (Patriot, 2023). Setting the scene for collaboration, Iin demonstrates the power of leadership responsive to collaborative dynamics through the group cohesion created amongst her staff (Vähäsantanen, 2015).

This trend toward educational reform is also intertwined with efforts to instil Islamic values in education, revealing how school leaders balance the dual demands of tradition and modernity. Arum's integrating the lessons of Islam into P5 projects positions environmental responsibility as a tangible skill and a spiritual responsibility (Khoiriyah et al., 2023; Romlah et al., 2024). She underscores the relevance of preserving nature alongside global issues such as sustainability through faith-based relevance by providing relevant *hadith*. Integration also establishes a strong connection between students' deeds, academic success, and worship practices, creating a *habitus* with a blend of tradition and modernity. Arum demonstrates how Islamic principles can enrich educational objectives, fostering moral development alongside academic progress (Rusdi et al., 2023; Tabroni et al., 2021).

Rafiq similarly integrates Islamic principles into his leadership, emphasizing the universal and inclusive values of Islam, such as justice (ʿadl), compassion (raḥma), and communal welfare (maṣlaḥa), which are foundational to Islamic ethical traditions as articulated in classical texts (Al-Ghazālī, 2004; Al-Shāṭibī, 1997). His methodology links religious identity and educational transformations so that students can play a constructive role in Indonesia's pluralistic society (Setiawan, 2024). In a similar vein, Ella practices the integration of Islamic teachings in the P5 themes due to the openness towards the curriculum's institutional objectives. The approach ensures spiritual elements are integrated across the courses and include academic achievements (Demir & Toprak, 2023; Mulya et al., 2021). Organizing religious teachings with the objectives of the national curriculum, Ella allows students to interact with contemporary goals but remains anchored in faith (Alhashmi, 2019).

When leaders navigate policy disparities, they often build out expertise and adapt that to systemic inconsistencies. The need for Arum to fulfil the delays in official materials by turning to her experiences of working with the previous curriculum to create temporary resources (Gunter & Forrester, 2010). Her practical skills and institutional knowledge effectively bridge systemic gaps, fostering an adaptive culture within her *madrasah* (Pak et al., 2020). Azis also displays his method of navigating policy disparities by adapting MoNE resources for his *madrasah*. His approach shows the necessity to adapt external frameworks to fit local realities and highlights how frameworks must be integrated into local and national reforms (Biesta, 2015; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2015). Iin's crafting of tailored indicators for P5 projects aligns local relevance with broader standards, reflecting her capacity to innovate within structural constraints while maintaining institutional coherence (Namgung et al., 2020).

These school leaders have made multifaceted strategies to enhance institutional resilience while ensuring that reforms are deeply rooted in culturally relevant contexts. Instead, they create easily achievable goals, collaboration through external frameworks, and integration of Islamic values and beyond to take structural constraints and turn them into growth opportunities. Their leadership offers a guide for balancing between being institutionally relevant while also fulfilling the educational and spiritual needs of their communities. Such insights highlight the significance of context-sensitive, reform-oriented leadership in transitional educational contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experience and leadership practices of Heads of Curriculum (HoC) among Indonesian Islamic schools concerning the challenges they face, not only in implementing the new curriculum KM but also in maintaining the religious integrity of their institutions. Utilizing Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus*, *field,* and *capital*, it illustrates how ingrained dispositions, informed by cultural, professional and systemic experiences, inform leadership practices. It sought to understand how HoCs negotiate the landscape of curriculum reform, balancing systemic pressure against the dual imperatives of national goals and Islamic values.

The findings show that they demonstrated a set of adaptive leadership practices based on resourcefulness, collaboration, and innovation. These included external networks such as partnering with MoNE and local collaboration initiatives that effectively addressed resource limitations and systemic gaps. Their incorporation of Islamic values into KM demonstrates their ability to blend established traditions with modern curricular goals through spiritual principles for embedding in sustainability projects and offering the *Rahmatan Lil Alamin* concept for the aim of diversity. These approaches highlight the necessity for leadership that translates institutional mission into the social and cultural ethos at large.

This study adds to the knowledge base on educational leadership by providing insights from the ground about how HoCs navigate curriculum reform in the specific context of Indonesian *madrasah*s. It expands on Bourdieu's framework to include cultural and religious dimensions, demonstrating how *habitus* plays out in fields that require the reconciliation between tradition and reform. Moreover, the results underscore the importance of adaptive leadership in

turning system conditions into opportunities to encourage the growth of the institution, ensure its competitiveness, and maintain relevance amidst increasing educational competition.

Although this study has limitations, it contributes to the evidence base. The study's small sample size of six HoCs restricts the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the focus on the perspectives of HoCs excludes insights from other key stakeholders, such as teachers, students, and parents, whose experiences could further illuminate the complexities of curriculum reform. Future research should have wider inclusion criteria and cover contexts of comparison to further insights. Moreover, as educational systems leverage technology more, future research could investigate the interplay between these innovations and the systemic versus individual cultural factors presented here.

Ultimately, this study highlights the transformative potential of leadership that harmonizes cultural authenticity with systemic reform. The ability of HoCs to align Islamic values with national educational goals provides a model for leadership in contexts where tradition and modernization must coexist. By fostering institutional resilience and ensuring alignment with broader social and cultural needs, these school leaders exemplify the critical role of context-sensitive, reform-oriented leadership in navigating educational transformation.

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