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The Contribution of Educators' Performance to School Competitiveness: A Case Study of Islamic Elementary Schools in Riau Islands

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Abstract: *This study explores the role of educators' work achievements in enhancing the competitive advantage of Integrated Islamic Elementary Schools in Riau Islands Province, Indonesia. This study involved 10 teachers and 3 school leaders from three Integrated Islamic Elementary Schools selected through purposive sampling. Drawing on qualitative case study methodology, the research investigates how professional development, innovative teaching practices, and leadership support contribute to institutional excellence. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo 12 software. The findings reveal that continuous professional growth, the integration of technology-based pedagogical strategies, and transformational leadership significantly improve school competitiveness. The findings provide actionable strategies for policymakers and school leaders to implement structured professional development and leadership support systems. This study contributes to the theoretical discourse by aligning its findings with Competitive Advantage Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Innovation Theory.*

Keywords: *Educator Performance, Professional Development, Islamic Education, Competitive Advantage, Innovation, Riau Islands*

INTRODUCTION

Integrated Islamic Elementary Schools in Indonesia play a vital role in shaping students' moral values and academic competencies from an early age. These institutions are distinguished by their holistic approach, combining national curricula with Islamic teachings to foster intellectual and spiritual development (Raihani 2020). As the global education landscape becomes increasingly competitive, Islamic schools must develop unique strategies to strengthen their institutional positioning (Sihotang and Sirear 2024). Competitive advantage in this context refers to an



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institution's ability to deliver superior educational services academically, spiritually, and socially compared to its counterparts (Porter 2018; Rahman and Ismail 2022)

Educators are central to the formation of this competitive edge. Numerous studies have emphasized that the performance, innovation capacity, and professional development of teachers significantly influence institutional outcomes (Ahmad, Hussain, and Ali 2021). Teachers who actively engage in capacity-building programs, adopt learner-centered pedagogies, and integrate technology in their classrooms not only improve student achievement but also enhance the school's public reputation (Hassan, Khalil, and Noor 2023). Additionally, educators' responsiveness to change and commitment to lifelong learning are increasingly seen as vital factors for school sustainability in the digital era. (Niemi and Choi 2021)

In the Indonesian context, Integrated Islamic Schools face specific challenges, including limited access to quality professional development programs and the need to balance religious and secular curricula.(Nistiti 2023) Despite the growing body of literature on Islamic education, few empirical studies have focused on how educators' work achievements translate into institutional competitiveness, especially in the Southeast Asian context (Zabidi and Yusof 2021). This gap is particularly relevant as faith-based schools compete not only with public and private schools, but also within their own networks to attract students and maintain standards.

The importance of innovation and educator performance is also recognized in global policy discourse. According to UNESCO (UNESCO 2021), the role of teachers as "agents of change" is fundamental in transforming education systems, particularly in marginalized or faith-based settings. However, there remains a lack of in-depth qualitative studies that explore how these dynamics unfold within Islamic schools operating in developing regions like Riau Islands Province, Indonesia.

This study aims to fill that gap by examining the specific contributions of educators' work achievements including professional development, pedagogical innovation, and leadership engagement in enhancing the competitive advantage of Integrated Islamic Elementary Schools in the Riau Islands. By aligning the analysis with Competitive Advantage Theory (Porter, 1985),



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Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993), and Innovation Theory (Schumpeter, 1934), this research aims to offer both theoretical insights and practical implications for policy and institutional development in Islamic education.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how educators' work achievements contribute to the competitive advantage of Integrated Islamic Elementary Schools in Riau Islands Province, Indonesia. A total of 13 participants, consisting of 10 educators and 3 school leaders, were selected using purposive sampling based on their experience and leadership roles. The research was conducted between June and October 2024 across three selected schools in Batam and Tanjungpinang. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo 12 software, following (Braun and Clarke 2006) six-phase thematic analysis model. The process included open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to extract key themes related to professional development, innovation, and leadership. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their identities were anonymized to maintain confidentiality and ethical compliance. The qualitative approach aligns with Creswell and Poth's (Creswell 2019) advocacy for deep contextual understanding and is consistent with prior studies emphasizing teacher agency in institutional development.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Professional Development and Human Capital Enhancement

The analysis of interview data reveals that professional development is a foundational pillar in strengthening the competitive positioning of Integrated Islamic Elementary Schools in the Riau Islands Province. Most educators interviewed described how their participation in structured training, national workshops, and certification programs significantly improved their pedagogical skills, classroom management, and ability to integrate Islamic values in creative ways. As one teacher remarked, *“Attending national seminars on Islamic pedagogy helped me innovate classroom activities and inspired me to start a digital Qur'an memorization project for my*

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students” (Educator A, Interview #3). This engagement with ongoing learning not only empowered educators to refine their instructional strategies but also elevated the academic reputation of their institutions, thereby attracting more students.

These findings align with Human Capital Theory (Becker 1993), which asserts that investments in human resources, particularly through education and skill development, yield substantial organizational benefits. Professional development, as evidenced in this study, increases teacher confidence, broadens methodological repertoire, and enhances the delivery of Islamic-based curriculum. This echoes the results of (Ahmad, Hussain, and Ali 2021) who found that Islamic schools that prioritize systematic teacher development programs exhibit improved student achievement and stronger community trust. Additionally, (Niemi and Choi 2021) argued that in 21st-century education, teachers’ ability to continuously learn is essential for fostering institutional adaptability and growth points clearly reflected in the outcomes of this research.

Instructional Innovation as a Competitive Differentiator

In addition to professional development, the study uncovered a strong emphasis on instructional innovation among participating educators. Innovation here refers not only to the use of educational technology but also to creative approaches to religious instruction, such as gamification of Qur’anic learning, flipped classrooms for Islamic history, and integration of multimedia in Fiqh and Akhlaq subjects. A respondent shared, *“By using educational apps and video-based learning, I noticed that students became more excited and were able to memorize surahs faster and more accurately”* (Educator B, Interview #5). These innovations contributed to improved academic outcomes and helped position schools as forward-thinking and responsive to contemporary challenges.

This finding affirms Innovation Theory (Schumpeter 1934), which holds that the introduction of novel methods and ideas is essential for achieving and sustaining competitive advantage. In the context of Islamic schools, the ability to innovate while maintaining religious authenticity becomes a strategic asset. As (Hassan, Khalil, and Noor 2023) emphasized, integrating digital tools into Islamic education enhances not only student engagement but also the institution’s reputation and



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market differentiation. Schools that adopted technology-supported instructional models were more likely to be perceived by parents as progressive and competent, thereby influencing their decision-making in school selection. This reflects how pedagogical innovation can serve as a driver of both internal improvement and external competitiveness.

Leadership and Institutional Culture: The Role of Transformational Leaders

The study also identified the critical role of school leadership in enabling and sustaining both teacher development and innovation. Transformational leaders—those who articulate a clear institutional vision, support teacher autonomy, and invest in staff capacity—were consistently cited as key enablers of progress. One school leader stated, *“We allocate part of our operational budget to support teacher training, especially in areas of instructional technology and Islamic pedagogy. It is an investment, not an expense”* (Leader C, Interview #2). Such support systems encouraged teachers to take risks, initiate classroom innovations, and collaborate across departments.

This observation strongly supports Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass 1990), which suggests that leaders who inspire and empower their followers foster greater organizational commitment and performance. The alignment of school goals with teacher aspirations created a positive institutional culture conducive to experimentation and excellence. Empirically, (Rahman and Ismail 2022) found that Islamic schools led by visionary principals reported higher teacher satisfaction and institutional effectiveness. In this study, the same dynamics were evident: where leadership was strong, schools were more agile, innovative, and respected within their communities. Thus, leadership not only serves a managerial function but also a catalytic one, facilitating sustainable competitive advantage through educator empowerment.

Integrated Thematic Analysis and Empirical Synthesis

To provide a comprehensive overview of the findings, the following table summarizes the key thematic categories and their indicators that emerged from the data analysis:

Thematic Category	Key Indicators
Professional Development	Certification programs, participation in national workshops, peer mentoring groups
Instructional Innovation	EdTech integration, flipped classrooms, gamification of Qur’an learning



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Transformational Leadership	Vision setting, innovation grants, teacher recognition and development programs
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Table1: Thematic Analysis

The interaction between these three components when synergistically aligned creates a self-reinforcing model of school improvement and competitive differentiation. Teachers who are professionally supported become more confident to innovate. In turn, innovations attract more attention and enrollment, thereby reinforcing the institutional growth loop.

Comparative Context and International Relevance

Comparative analysis further reinforces the relevance of these findings in a broader context. For example, (Zainudin, Ahmad, and Yusof 2020) in Malaysia noted that centralized government support for Islamic education allowed for systematic professional development, though bureaucratic constraints often limited innovation. Meanwhile, (Demir and Akyol 2022) in Turkey highlighted that school leadership in Imam Hatip schools was a strong predictor of school quality, particularly when principals had pedagogical backgrounds. In contrast, this study suggests that in Indonesia's decentralized educational system, especially in private Islamic schools, institutional competitiveness is more dependent on local school initiatives and the proactive agency of educators and leaders. Therefore, while foundational theories such as human capital and innovation remain relevant, their practical application is context-sensitive and shaped by policy environments.

Theoretical Contributions and Policy Implications

This study contributes to theory by demonstrating how classical frameworks—Human Capital Theory, Innovation Theory, and Transformational Leadership—can be operationalized in the unique cultural and religious context of Southeast Asian Islamic education. Empirically, it adds to the growing literature on teacher agency and leadership in faith-based schooling, offering grounded insight into the mechanisms through which educational institutions enhance their competitiveness. Practically, the findings suggest that educational policymakers should invest in building professional ecosystems within Islamic schools that promote innovation, reward leadership, and facilitate sustainable development.



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CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of educators' work achievements in developing the competitive advantage of Integrated Islamic Elementary Schools in Riau Islands Province. The findings indicate that professional development, instructional innovation, and transformational leadership are critical in enhancing institutional competitiveness. Educators who are supported through training and leadership practices are more likely to deliver effective and adaptive instruction. Moreover, leadership practices that emphasize vision, collaboration, and empowerment foster a school culture conducive to innovation and performance. This study contributes theoretically by contextualizing classic models of competitive advantage and human capital within Islamic education, and practically by offering strategies to strengthen teacher quality and school positioning.

Recommendations

1. School leaders should implement structured professional development programs, including certification, mentoring, and national training engagement.
2. Encourage ICT-based pedagogy by allocating budget for educational technology and innovation grants.
3. Adopt transformational leadership practices that emphasize vision-building, teacher empowerment, and instructional leadership.
4. Policy support is needed at the regional level to provide access to technology, training, and collaboration networks in underserved Islamic schools.

Limitations and Future Research This study is limited to a small sample in one province, which restricts the generalizability of findings. Future research is encouraged to conduct comparative studies across broader regions or multiple provinces using mixed-method approaches to deepen insights into educator impact on school competitiveness.

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