

Principal Accountability In Enhancing The Quality Of Islamic Religious Education Instruction: A Qualitative Study At SMK-S Al-Inayah

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2021-08-14

Revised 2021-11-12

Accepted 2022-01-17

ABSTRAK

Upaya berkelanjutan untuk meningkatkan kualitas Pendidikan Agama Islam (IRE) di sekolah menengah kejuruan sangat bergantung pada akuntabilitas manajerial yang dilakukan oleh kepala sekolah, namun sebagian besar studi Indonesia masih memperlakukan akuntabilitas kepala sekolah sebagai daftar periksa administrasi daripada sebagai pendorong instruksional yang terkait dengan domain mata pelajaran tertentu. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana akuntabilitas prinsipal beroperasi sebagai mekanisme perencanaan, pengawasan, evaluasi, dan pembangunan budaya yang terintegrasi yang membentuk kualitas pengajaran IRE di SMK-S Al-Inayah, Rimbo Bujang, Provinsi Jambi, Indonesia. Desain studi kasus kualitatif digunakan, dengan informan dipilih secara sengaja, terdiri dari satu kepala sekolah, satu koordinator-guru IRE, dan satu siswa kelas dua belas. Data dihasilkan melalui observasi kelas non-peserta di empat sesi, tiga wawancara semi-terstruktur masing-masing 45-60 menit, dan analisis dokumenter rencana kerja sekolah, catatan pengawasan, dan laporan prestasi pembelajaran. Analisis mengikuti model Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña, dan kepercayaan ditetapkan melalui triangulasi sumber dan metode dan pemeriksaan anggota. Temuan tersebut mengungkapkan bahwa akuntabilitas kepala sekolah diberlakukan melalui enam praktik konkret: menetapkan standar kompetensi, mengawasi instruksi, mengevaluasi hasil pembelajaran, memfasilitasi pengembangan profesional guru, bermitra dengan orang tua, dan membuat laporan kinerja berkala. Kualitas instruksional dirasakan di sepanjang tiga dimensi: metode inovatif, pembentukan karakter, dan penyelarasan manajemen-kurikulum. Peran kepala sekolah didistribusikan di seluruh fase perencanaan, implementasi, dan evaluasi siklus instruksional, menunjukkan bahwa akuntabilitas berfungsi kurang sebagai kepatuhan birokrasi dan lebih sebagai kepemimpinan instruksional. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa akuntabilitas spesifik mata pelajaran, siklus, dan budaya adalah model yang layak untuk memperkuat kualitas IRE di sekolah kejuruan swasta.

Kata kunci: kepemimpinan instruksional; pendidikan agama Islam; akuntabilitas utama; budaya sekolah; sekolah menengah kejuruan.

ABSTRACT

Sustained efforts to elevate the quality of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in vocational secondary schools depend critically on the managerial

accountability exercised by the school principal, yet most Indonesian studies still treat principal accountability as an administrative checklist rather than as an instructional driver linked to specific subject domains. This study examines how principal accountability operates as an integrated mechanism of planning, supervision, evaluation, and culture-building that shapes the quality of IRE instruction at SMK-S Al-Inayah, Rimbo Bujang, Jambi Province, Indonesia. A qualitative case-study design was employed, with informants selected purposively, comprising one principal, one IRE coordinator-teacher, and one twelfth-grade student. Data were generated through non-participant classroom observation across four sessions, three semi-structured interviews of 45–60 minutes each, and documentary analysis of school work plans, supervision records, and learning achievement reports. Analysis followed the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model, and trustworthiness was established through source and method triangulation and member checking. The findings reveal that principal accountability is enacted through six concrete practices: setting competence standards, supervising instruction, evaluating learning outcomes, facilitating teacher professional development, partnering with parents, and producing periodic performance reports. Instructional quality is perceived along three dimensions: innovative methods, character formation, and management-curriculum alignment. The principal's role is distributed across the planning, implementation, and evaluation phases of the instructional cycle, indicating that accountability functions less as bureaucratic compliance and more as instructional leadership. The study concludes that subject-specific, cyclical, and culture-embedded accountability is a feasible model for strengthening IRE quality in private vocational schools.

Keywords: *Instructional Leadership; Islamic Religious Education; Principal Accountability; School Culture; Vocational Secondary School.*

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1. PENDAHULUAN

The quality of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in Indonesian secondary schools has become a central policy concern as the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Culture have repeatedly emphasized character formation, religious moderation, and learning outcomes as outputs of formal schooling. Vocational secondary schools (SMK), which prioritize technical competence, often face a structural dilemma in which the proportion of instructional hours devoted to religious and moral subjects is comparatively limited, while public expectations regarding student character remain high (Sudirman et al., 2023; Fakhurrozi et al., 2023). Within such an institutional

setting, the school principal is positioned as the actor most responsible for ensuring that IRE instruction does not become marginal but instead operates as an effective vehicle for shaping the affective and spiritual dimensions of learners (Brooks et al., 2020; Said et al., 2023). Recent reports from school supervisors in Bungo Regency further indicate that variation in IRE learning outcomes across schools is more strongly associated with managerial leadership than with curriculum content (Setyawan, 2025; Mahmudah & Supriatin, 2024), suggesting that principal-level practices warrant focused empirical attention.

Existing scholarship on principal accountability has produced three relatively distinct streams. The first stream, exemplified by Bracci et al. (2021) and Dahlan et al. (2024), conceptualizes accountability primarily as the obligation to govern schools through financial transparency and the proper use of resources entrusted to the institution. The second stream, represented by Hallinger, Liu, and Chen (2025), Bush (2025), and Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2020), frames the principal as an instructional leader and supervisor whose role is to improve teacher attitudes, performance, and student achievement through systematic, continuous quality management. A third, more recent stream, illustrated by Kadarsih et al. (2025), Effendi and Sahertian (2023), and Muttaqin et al. (2023), emphasizes the principal's capacity to implement effective academic supervision as a determinant of teacher motivation and professionalism, while Pai et al. (2025) extend this perspective to school program design grounded in the eight National Education Standards. Although these works clarify the general functions of principal leadership, they tend to treat accountability either at the level of finance or at the level of generic teacher supervision, with limited attention to how accountability is operationalized inside a single subject domain. Studies that do address IRE specifically, including Illah et al. (2022), Nasrullah et al. (2023), and Demirel Ucan and Wright (2019), generally focus on teacher competence development or character-based curriculum implementation rather than on the managerial mechanisms that sustain quality across the entire instructional cycle. Consequently, the literature exhibits a gap concerning the way principal accountability is enacted as an integrated planning–implementation–evaluation cycle specifically for IRE in private vocational schools.

Building on this gap, the present study advances the idea that principal accountability for IRE is best understood as a subject-specific, cyclical, and culture-embedded set of practices rather than a generic administrative function. The contribution of the work lies in disaggregating accountability into observable practices that can be traced across the instructional cycle and in linking those practices to perceived dimensions of IRE quality articulated by teachers and students. The objectives of the study are therefore threefold: (i) to describe how principal accountability is implemented in the delivery of IRE at SMK-S Al-Inayah; (ii) to identify the dimensions through which IRE instructional quality is perceived by classroom-level stakeholders; and (iii) to map the principal's role across the planning, implementation, and evaluation phases of IRE as a manifestation of leadership accountability. To pursue these objectives, a qualitative case-study approach was employed, drawing on observation, in-depth interviews, and documentary analysis, as detailed in the following section.

2. METODE

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative case-study design with a descriptive orientation, following the procedural guidance of Creswell and Creswell (2018). The case-study design was chosen because the research questions concern process and meaning rather than measurable association, and because principal accountability for IRE is bound to a specific institutional setting. The unit of analysis was the principal's accountability practice in the IRE instructional cycle at a single private vocational school.

Research Site and Informants

The research site was SMK-S Al-Inayah, located in Rimbo Bujang Sub-district, Bungo Regency, Jambi Province, Indonesia. Informants were selected through purposive sampling, with the criterion that each informant possessed direct authority over, responsibility for, or experience with IRE instruction. Three primary informants were involved: (i) the school principal, who held overall managerial authority; (ii) the senior IRE teacher serving as subject coordinator, who managed daily IRE delivery; and (iii) one twelfth-grade student, who represented the learner perspective on IRE quality. The number of informants was kept deliberately small because the case-study design prioritized analytic depth over breadth.

Data Generation Procedures

Data were generated using three procedures, executed in the same sequence later used to organize the Results section. First, non-participant classroom observation was conducted across four IRE sessions of approximately 80 minutes each, using a structured observation protocol covering lesson opening, instructional method, learner engagement, and closure. Observation notes were time-stamped to the nearest minute. Second, semi-structured interviews of 45–60 minutes were conducted with each informant; interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim within 48 hours. The interview protocol contained open-ended prompts on planning, supervision, evaluation, professional development, parental engagement, and reporting. Third, documentary analysis was performed on the school annual work plan, the IRE syllabus and lesson plans, principal supervision records for the current academic year, and student learning achievement reports. All instruments and recording devices were calibrated before use; the digital recorder used for interviews had a manufacturer-specified frequency response of 60–20,000 Hz with a sampling tolerance of $\pm 0.1\%$, considered adequate for verbatim transcription, while a stopwatch with a resolution of 0.01 s was used for timing observation segments.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020), comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing-and-verification. Coding was performed manually in two cycles: an initial descriptive cycle that labeled segments according to accountability practice, and a focused cycle that grouped the descriptive codes into the three thematic clusters reported in the Results section—implementation of accountability, perceived quality of IRE instruction, and the principal's role across the instructional cycle. Trustworthiness was established through source triangulation across the three informant categories, method triangulation across observation, interview, and document data, and member checking with the principal and the

IRE coordinator. Ethical procedures included verbal informed consent, anonymization of student data, and the right to withdraw at any stage.

3. HASIL DAN PEMBAHASAN

HASIL The findings are presented in three sub-sections that mirror the order of the data-generation procedures and the research objectives stated in the Introduction: (i) the implementation of principal accountability in IRE delivery, (ii) the perceived quality of IRE instruction, and (iii) the principal's role across the planning, implementation, and evaluation phases of IRE.

3.1 Implementation of Principal Accountability in IRE Delivery

Six concrete accountability practices were identified at SMK-S Al-Inayah. The principal set IRE-specific competence standards that served as a reference for teachers when designing instructional materials and selecting strategies aligned with learner characteristics. The principal also conducted instructional supervision of IRE teachers, covering both the lesson plan and its classroom implementation, and used supervision findings to provide constructive feedback. Periodic evaluation of student learning outcomes in IRE was carried out not only to measure cognitive attainment but also to inform reflective improvement of instructional strategies. The principal facilitated teacher professional development through training, seminars, workshops, and the subject-teacher consultation forum (MGMP). Partnership with parents was operationalized through joint religious activities and moral guidance programs, positioning the family as a co-educator in character formation. Finally, the principal produced periodic performance reports on IRE delivery that functioned both as administrative documentation and as a continuous quality-improvement instrument. Table 1 summarizes the six practices and their observable indicators.

Table 1. Six Accountability Practices Enacted by the Principal of SMK-S Al-Inayah

No.	Accountability Practice	Observable Indicator
1	Setting competence standards	IRE-specific learning outcomes are formulated and used as references for syllabus and lesson-plan development.

No.	Accountability Practice	Observable Indicator
2	Instructional supervision	Lesson plans and classroom delivery are reviewed; supervision logs document feedback to teachers.
3	Evaluation of learning outcomes	Mid-term and end-of-term IRE results are analyzed; outcomes inform refinement of instructional strategies.
4	Teacher professional development	IRE teachers participate in training, seminars, workshops, and the subject-teacher consultation forum (MGMP).
5	Parental partnership	Joint religious activities and moral guidance programs link the school with families.
6	Periodic performance reporting	IRE performance reports are produced each term as both documentation and improvement instruments.

Beyond these six practices, the principal embedded IRE within the school's annual planning cycle. At the start of each academic year, the work plan was developed with reference to the eight National Education Standards and aligned with the school's vision and mission. Teachers, education personnel, the school committee, and parents participated in an annual forum that determined program priorities, including the strengthening of IRE. Each program was assigned a clear budget allocation, and a quality-development team—coordinated with the deputy principal for curriculum—ensured that IRE programs aligned with the prevailing curriculum.

Perceived Quality of IRE Instruction

From the learner perspective, the quality of IRE instruction was perceived along three dimensions. The first dimension was the use of innovative instructional methods, in which the teacher acted as a facilitator who guided learners in developing potential, creativity, and critical-analytical thinking rather than serving as the sole source of information. The second dimension was the explicit focus on character formation, achieved by integrating moral and ethical values into every learning activity. The third dimension was the alignment between management and curriculum: managerial functions of planning, organizing, implementing, and supervising were synchronized with curricular elements covering objectives, materials, strategies, and assessment, so that cognitive, affective, and psychomotor potentials were developed in a balanced manner. Figure 1 displays the three dimensions and their relationship to the accountability practices reported in Section 3.1.

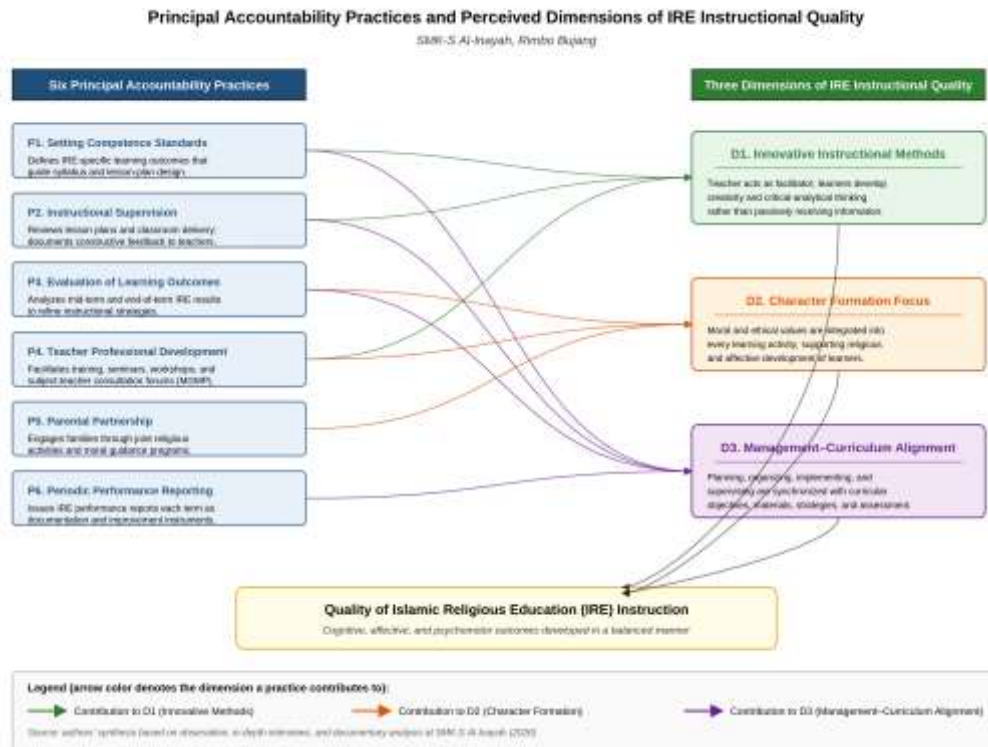


Figure 1. Perceived dimensions of IRE instructional quality at SMK-S Al-Inayah and their links to the six principal accountability practices.

PEMBAHASAN

The findings extend the conventional reading of principal accountability proposed by Bracci et al. (2021) and Dahlan et al. (2024), who frame accountability primarily as a financial-transparency obligation governing the use of resources entrusted to a school. The six practices identified at SMK-S Al-Inayah indicate that, in a private vocational school context, accountability operates not only as a financial-administrative reporting function but also as a continuous instructional management cycle. This expands the unit of analysis from the institution as a whole to a specific subject domain, IRE, where standard-setting, supervision, evaluation, professional development, parental partnership, and reporting form a coherent set of practices. The six-practice inventory therefore complements the digital-platform-based accountability mechanisms recently described in Indonesian school reform studies, which tend to focus on tools rather than on subject-specific instructional outcomes.

When compared with Hallinger, Liu, and Chen (2025) and Bush (2025), who position the principal as an instructional leader whose central function is to improve teacher attitudes and instructional quality, the present study confirms that supervision is central but adds two refinements. First, supervision is more effective when it is preceded by explicit competence-standard setting, because supervision findings can then be benchmarked against pre-defined IRE outcomes rather than against generic teaching criteria, in line with the meta-analytical evidence reported by Pietsch, Aydin, and Gümüş (2025) and Shen and Wu (2025) that contextualization strengthens leadership effects. Second, supervision interacts with parental partnership, suggesting

that classroom-level instructional improvement in IRE depends on extending accountability beyond the school gate. Effendi and Sahertian (2023), Muttaqin et al. (2023), and Syukri et al. (2023) similarly highlight that effective academic supervision raises teacher motivation, professionalism, and commitment; the present findings are consistent with this view, while indicating that motivation-oriented supervision functions best within a fixed annual planning cycle anchored to the eight National Education Standards reported by Pai et al. (2025) and Setyawan (2025). Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2020) further emphasize that successful school leadership rests on a small number of resilient practices repeated across contexts, which resonates with the cyclical pattern observed in this study.

A second point of dialog concerns the perceived dimensions of IRE quality. Sudirman et al. (2023), Fakhurrozi et al. (2023), and Nasrullah et al. (2023) emphasize character-based IRE implementation in vocational schools as the cornerstone of quality, while Metcalfe and Moulin-Stožek (2021) and Demirel Ucan and Wright (2019) underline the pedagogical sophistication required of religious-education teachers in pluralistic settings. The present study refines these positions by showing that character formation, while necessary, is insufficient on its own: at SMK-S Al-Inayah, learners associated quality with the simultaneous presence of innovative methods, explicit character focus, and management-curriculum alignment. The interaction of these three dimensions suggests that character outcomes are mediated by the methodological and managerial conditions established by the principal, rather than emerging directly from curriculum content. Mahmudah and Supriatin (2024) and Illah et al. (2022) report parallel findings in other Indonesian Islamic educational settings, where principal strategy and the development of IRE teacher competence jointly shape learning quality. This interpretation remains within the boundaries of the data; the relative weight of each dimension was not measured quantitatively, and the present findings should not be read as a causal claim.

A third point concerns the cyclical character of the principal's role. The planning–implementation–evaluation distribution observed in the field aligns with the instructional-leadership perspective emphasized by Hallinger, Liu, and Niu (2025), Zheng, Yin, and Liu (2022), and Kadarsih et al. (2025), but it goes further by showing that each phase contains differentiated accountability mechanisms. In the planning phase, accountability is documentary and consultative; in the implementation phase, it is observational and developmental; in the evaluation phase, it is analytical and corrective. This cyclical, phase-differentiated structure is consistent with Brooks et al. (2020) and Said et al. (2023), who depict Islamic-school principals as socio-religious curators whose authority must be exercised across multiple registers. Anjarrini and Rindaningsih (2022) and Rosid and Alfaruq (2023) also document similar patterns, where principal management of religious culture, discipline, and creativity in Islamic schools is enacted through phased routines rather than single events. Mardhiah et al. (2023) and Rohmad et al. (2024) reinforce this picture by showing that teacher professional development and curriculum implementation, when coordinated by principal leadership, produce measurable gains in academic and character outcomes. Hamengkubuwono and Pratama (2022) report comparable dynamics in integrated Islamic public-private schools, where leadership style mediates institutional performance. Two

limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. The study involved a single school and three primary informants, which restricts statistical generalization, and the data were generated within one academic term, which limits inferences about long-term effects on student outcomes. Studies in additional sites and across multiple terms would help test the boundary conditions of the model.

4. KESIMPULAN

Returning to the three objectives stated in the Introduction, the study has shown that principal accountability for IRE at SMK-S Al-Inayah is enacted through an integrated set of six practices spanning standard-setting, supervision, evaluation, professional development, parental partnership, and periodic reporting; that the perceived quality of IRE instruction is articulated along three interrelated dimensions of innovative methods, character formation, and management-curriculum alignment; and that the principal's role is distributed across the planning, implementation, and evaluation phases of the instructional cycle, each anchored by phase-appropriate accountability mechanisms. Taken together, these findings indicate that subject-specific, cyclical, and culture-embedded accountability is a workable approach for elevating IRE quality in private vocational schools. Further research is encouraged to test the model across multiple sites, examine its longitudinal effects on student learning outcomes, and explore its adaptation to public secondary schools and to other subject domains where instructional quality and character formation intersect.

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