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Strategies for Strengthening Madrasah Quality through the Implementation of ISO 21001 Principles: A Case Study at MTs Salafiyah Bode, Cirebon Regency

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ABSTRACT
Madrasah Tsanawiyah Salafiyah Bode, a private Islamic educational institution in Cirebon Regency, faces real challenges in maintaining and improving quality amid limited resources. This study examines how the principles of ISO 21001:2018 the management systems standard for educational organizations issued by the International Organization for Standardization can serve as a strategic framework for strengthening madrasah quality. A descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design was employed. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the principal, vice principals, senior teachers, and the school committee; observation of managerial and learning processes; and review of institutional documents. Analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña with source and method triangulation. The findings indicate that applying ISO 21001 principles particularly in the clauses on organizational context, leadership, planning, support, and performance evaluation gradually shifts madrasah management from reactive-intuitive practices toward more planned, measurable, and improvement-oriented governance. The principal's transformative leadership proved to be the primary determinant in driving cultural change toward quality. This study offers an adaptive and contextual quality enhancement model for private madrasah in Indonesia seeking to raise standards without starting from scratch.

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INTRODUCTION

There's an understated irony in the management of private Islamic schools in Indonesia: institutions whose primary mission is to educate students often face the greatest challenges in their own management (Yunadi, 2025). Budget constraints, uneven human resource competency, manual documentation systems, and the absence of standardized evaluation mechanisms combine to slowly erode the quality of educational services. MTs Salafiyah Bode in Cirebon Regency is one of thousands of private Islamic schools in Indonesia facing this challenge.

The issue isn't whether educational quality is important; almost all madrasah administrators agree that it is. The issue is how to systematically manage quality when resources are limited, managerial capacity is underdeveloped, and day-to-day operational pressures already consume so much time and energy (Wachid et al., 2024). This is where a quality management framework like ISO 21001:2018 can play a non-trivial role.

ISO 21001:2018 is an international management system standard specifically for educational organizations, developed by the International Organization for Standardization as a derivative of ISO 9001 adapted to the educational context (Nadjamuddin et al., 2024). Unlike national accreditation standards, which tend to be compliance-driven, ISO 21001 offers a more process-oriented framework and continuous improvement two things that are highly needed by

madrasas seeking organic and sustainable growth (Marzal, 2022). Its core principles include a student-centered focus, committed leadership, a process-based approach, evidence-based decision-making, and stakeholder relationship management.

Several studies have documented the positive impact of implementing quality management standards in educational institutions. (Tambingon et al., 2025) found that the implementation of ISO 9001 in secondary schools in Pakistan significantly improved stakeholder satisfaction and the efficiency of administrative processes. A study (Wasitoh et al., 2025) in public madrasas in West Java showed a positive correlation between the implementation of a quality management system and student academic performance. However, studies specifically examining the implementation of ISO 21001, rather than ISO 9001, in medium-sized private madrasas in Indonesia are still very limited. Most studies focus on public schools or universities, while the context of private madrasas, with all their unique characteristics and limitations, is largely untouched.

This gap is what this study aims to address. By taking MTs Salafiyah Bode as the unit of analysis, this study aims to: (1) identify the actual condition of quality management in madrasas based on the ISO 21001:2018 framework; (2) analyze quality strengthening strategies developed based on the principles of ISO 21001; and (3) identify factors that influence the successful implementation of these strategies in the context of private madrasas. Thus, this study is expected to contribute in the form of an adaptive quality strengthening model, not a model simply imported from the industry, but one that has been contextualized to the reality of madrasas in Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research is based on a simple belief: to understand how a madrasah strives to strengthen its quality, the best way is to go inside the process, not measure it from the outside. Therefore, the chosen approach is descriptive qualitative, with a single case study design, following Yin's (2018) methodological framework. This design was chosen because the research aims to understand the process and context in depth, something that cannot be captured by quantitative instruments (Rustendi, 2022).

The research location was MTs Salafiyah Bode, a private junior high school (madrasah) under the auspices of the Salafiyah Bode Foundation and located in Plumbon District, Cirebon Regency, West Java. This madrasah was selected based on several considerations: first, the availability of adequate institutional documents for analysis; second, the existence of ongoing leadership initiatives to strengthen the management system; and third, its representation as a medium-sized private madrasah facing unique quality challenges common in Indonesia.

Data collection was conducted using three complementary techniques. First, in-depth semi-structured interviews with key informants: the madrasah principal, the deputy head of curriculum, the deputy head of student affairs, three senior teachers with more than five years of tenure, and two members of the madrasah committee. The semi-structured format was chosen to ensure the research questions were answered while also allowing informants to raise unexpected perspectives. Second, direct observation of managerial processes and classroom learning focused on how quality policies were implemented in everyday practice. Third, review documents that include: the madrasah's annual work program, academic supervision reports, quality policy documents, coordination meeting reports, and academic data for the last three years.

Data analysis used the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which includes four stages: data collection, data condensation (reducing and focusing relevant data), data presentation, and drawing and verifying conclusions (Kadza, 2024). This process was carried out iteratively, with researchers repeatedly returning to the raw data to ensure that the resulting interpretations did not stray too far from the existing evidence. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation (comparing statements from various informants), method triangulation (matching interview data with documents and observations), and member checking. Draft research findings were confirmed with key informants before conclusions were drawn.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Institutional Profile of MTs Salafiyah Bode

MTs Salafiyah Bode was founded in 1965 under the auspices of the Salafiyah Bode Foundation, which is rooted in the Islamic educational tradition of NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) in eastern Cirebon. Over nearly six decades, the madrasah has undergone various phases of development, from a non-formal Islamic study institution to a registered madrasah, and then to B-accreditation by BAN-S/M. Currently, MTs Salafiyah Bode serves approximately 340 students spread across nine study groups (rombel), with 24 teaching staff and eight administrative staff.

Demographically, most students come from farming and small-scale traders in the Plumbon district and surrounding areas. This socio-economic background positions the madrasah as a primary educational institution for those with limited access to reputable private schools. This context is crucial: the resource constraints faced by MTs Salafiyah Bode are not merely managerial issues but also reflect the socio-economic conditions of the community it serves.

The principal of the madrasah, who has served since 2020, M. Fauzi, M.Pd., is a graduate of the Master of Educational Management program and brings a systems-based management perspective to madrasah management. He initiated the idea of using the ISO 21001 framework as a guide for quality improvement, not with the goal of achieving international certification soon, but rather to have a clear map of which aspects need improvement and the logical sequence of those improvements.

MTs Salafiyah Bode berdiri sejak tahun 1965 di bawah naungan Yayasan Salafiyah Bode yang berakar pada tradisi pendidikan Islam NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) di wilayah Cirebon bagian timur. Selama hampir enam dekade, madrasah ini telah mengalami berbagai fase perkembangan dari lembaga pengajian non-formal yang berkembang menjadi madrasah berstatus terdaftar, kemudian terakreditasi B oleh BAN-S/M. Saat ini, MTs Salafiyah Bode melayani kurang lebih 340 peserta didik yang tersebar di sembilan rombongan belajar (rombel), dengan 24 tenaga pendidik dan delapan tenaga kependidikan.

Initial Quality Condition: Mapping Based on ISO 21001 Clauses

Before designing a strengthening strategy, the first step is to map the actual conditions based on the clauses of ISO 21001:2018 (Yazid et al., 2021). This mapping is conducted through a combination of interviews, observations, and document reviews. The results are then verified in a focused discussion forum with the madrasah leadership team. Table 1 summarizes the results of this mapping.

Table 1. Mapping of the Actual Conditions of MTs Salafiyah Bode Based on ISO Clauses

Clause	Title Clause ISO 21001	Main Focus	Conditions at MTs Salafiyah Bode
4	Organizational Context	Identification of stakeholders and internal-external issues	Limited SWOT analysis; stakeholder mapping not formally documented
5	Leadership	Top management commitment and quality policy	The principal of the madrasah is active in quality direction; a written quality policy already exists but has not been disseminated evenly.
6	Planning	Risk & opportunity management; measurable quality targets	Planning is annual in nature; risk management has not been formalized within the ISO framework.
7	Support	Human resources, infrastructure, competency, communication, documentation	Limited human resource competency in the field of ICT and documentation systems; some physical facilities require updating.
8	Operation	Planning & controlling the learning process	The learning process is documented in the lesson plan; however, the consistency of implementation needs to be improved.
9	Performance Evaluation	Monitoring, internal audit, management review	Supervision of the madrasah principal is ongoing; internal audits have not been systematically scheduled.
10	Improvement	Correction of nonconformities & continuous improvement	Supervisory follow-up exists; the PDCA cycle has not been explicitly implemented and documented.

Table 1 shows that the general condition of MTs Salafiyah Bode is at what quality management researchers often call the early awareness stage: there is awareness of the importance of quality, some practices are already in place, but no system yet integrates all these components into a cohesive and documented framework (Widiastuti et al., 2025). The most critical clauses are Clause 6 (Planning) and Clause 10 (Improvement), the two clauses that ultimately determine whether an organization moves forward systematically or remains stagnant.

What is interesting about this mapping result is that the principal and leadership team themselves acknowledged these gaps without defensiveness a sign of organizational health that should not be underestimated. A willingness to openly acknowledge weaknesses is a cultural prerequisite that is no less important than technical readiness in implementing a quality management system.

Quality Strengthening Strategy Based on ISO 21001 Principles

Based on the initial condition mapping, the MTs Salafiyah Bode leadership team, along with researchers, developed a quality improvement strategy that adheres to the principles of ISO 21001. This strategy was not designed as a large, simultaneous program due to capacity limitations, but rather as a series of gradual interventions starting from areas with the highest impact and lowest resistance. Table 2 presents the strategic framework systematically.

Table 2. Quality Strengthening Strategy Per Dimension Based on ISO 21001:2018 Principles

Quality Dimensions	Initial Conditions	Implemented Strategies	Succes Indicators
Leadership & Quality Policy	There is a quality policy but it has not been disseminated evenly to all members of the madrasah community.	Weekly coordination meeting; creation of quality policy posters in strategic spaces	100% of teachers are aware of the madrasah quality policy (target); level of understanding is measured through an internal survey.
Human Resources Competence	Some teachers have not received training on the latest curriculum; ICT competencies vary	In-house and external training programs; mentoring senior teachers to juniors	Increased academic supervision scores; training participation > 80% per year
Documentation and Information Systems	Documentation is still manual and scattered; there is no integrated system.	Digitization of administrative archives; implementation of the Madrasah Management Information System (IMMIS)	Reduced document search time; increased data accuracy; faster information access
Learning Process	The consistency of lesson plans with classroom implementation needs to be improved; formative assessment is not yet optimal.	Workshop on developing achievement-based lesson plans; strengthening formative assessment and differentiated learning	Academic supervision scores improve; UN/AN results show positive trend
Continuous Evaluation and Improvement	Supervision exists but follow-up is less systematic; improvement cycles are not documented.	Explicit implementation of the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle; scheduled internal quality audits	Internal audit reports available; percentage of non-conformities resolved within a cycle > 90%

Table 2 shows that the strategies developed are operational and contextual, rather than mechanical adaptations of generic ISO guidelines (Zahirrah et al., 2025). For example, in the documentation dimension, the madrasah did not immediately invest in an expensive document management system, but instead began with a more affordable step: digitizing archives using Google Drive and Google Forms for student data collection and teacher attendance. This small step turned out to have a significant impact on the speed and accuracy of data-driven decision-making.

For the learning process dimension, the chosen strategy was an achievement-based lesson plan development workshop facilitated by madrasah supervisors from the Cirebon Regency Ministry of Religious Affairs. This workshop was not merely technical training; it also served as a dialogue about what is truly expected from the learning process and how formative assessment can be used as a tool for improvement, not just as a means of assessment.

Before and After Conditions: Observable Managerial Shifts

After the strategy had been implemented for approximately one semester, several concrete managerial shifts began to be observed. These shifts cannot yet be considered a complete "successful implementation of ISO 21001," given that the process of implementing quality standards is a long-term journey, but they are significant enough to be analyzed as indicators of the right direction. Table 3 presents a comparison of conditions before and after the strategy intervention.

Table 3. Comparison of Quality Conditions Before and After Implementing ISO 21001-Based Strategy

Aspect	Before Reinforcement (Initial Condition)	After Reinforcement (Targeted Condition)
Quality Planning	Annual programs exist, but quality targets are not measured in a SMART manner; planning is of an administrative routine nature.	Work program based on measurable quality indicators; targets are formulated in SMART format and reviewed every semester.
Policy Communication	The quality policy is known to management and some staff; it has not yet become a shared understanding.	The quality policy is socialized in a structured manner; all members of the madrasah understand and internalize it.
Risk Management	Risk identification is done intuitively without documentation; there is no written mitigation plan.	Documented risk register; mitigation plans prepared for high category risks
Learning Monitoring	Supervision is conducted but not consistently scheduled; instruments are not standardized.	Structured supervision schedule per semester; competency-based standardized instruments; results used for coaching
Stakeholder Satisfaction	There is no formal mechanism to measure the satisfaction of students, parents, or other stakeholders.	Satisfaction surveys are conducted at least once per year; the results are used as input for management reviews.
Quality Documentation	Archives are scattered and largely manual; difficult to access and prone to loss.	Integrated (digital) documentation system; document storage and coding standards are enforced

The changes that are most felt by all madrasah residents, not only by the leadership, are in the dimensions of policy communication and documentation (Sofya et al., 2025). Before the intervention, many teachers when asked about the vision and mission of the madrasah gave different answers. After structured socialization through coordination meetings and the installation of vision-mission banners in strategic spaces, the consistency of answers increased noticeably. This may sound like a small change, but in the perspective of ISO 21001, consistency of understanding of the direction of the organization is the foundation of everything.

The most difficult change and this is consistent with the findings of previous research (Khodijah & Rizki, 2025) is in the risk management and cyclical dimensions of PDCA. Asking teachers and staff to think in the logic of '*plan, do, check, act*' explicitly requires a change in thinking that does not happen in a matter of months. What can be done in the short term is to start with small rituals that instill the logic of PDCA: for example, requiring each program proposed in a coordination meeting to include specific indicators of success and its evaluation mechanisms.

DISCUSSION

ISO 21001 as a Framework, Not a Target

The findings of this study both confirm and refine the understanding of what is truly meant by "implementing ISO 21001." The most flawed way to start is to set the certification target as the primary goal, then work backward from there, filling out the required paperwork, rather than improving weak processes. This approach almost certainly results in a neat pile of documentation on paper, but no real improvement in the quality of educational services received by students.

At MTs Salafiyah Bode, the principal explicitly chose a different approach: using ISO 21001 as a diagnostic framework first, a tool to assess the school's current position and where it needs to move, before considering certification (Encu & Sudarma, 2022). This choice aligns with the argument that a principles-based orientation yields more meaningful implementation than a document-based orientation (Sholeh & Murhayati, 2025). However, this finding also adds a nuance: a principles-based approach is only effective if accompanied by the leader's ability to translate these abstract principles into concrete steps that can be implemented by teachers and staff who may be unfamiliar with ISO terminology.

This is both a communication challenge and a leadership challenge. When the principal explained the concept of "risk management" not as a technical ISO term but as "thinking about potential obstacles before a program begins and preparing solutions," the teacher response was much more positive. This contextual translation, while seemingly trivial, turns out to be a critical factor in distinguishing successful implementation from implementation that exists only on paper.

Transformative Leadership as a Catalyst for Cultural Change

If there's one most consistent finding throughout this research, it's this: no system, no matter how sophisticated, will move without a leader who truly understands it and consistently mobilizes the community to implement it. This isn't a cliché; it's an empirical reality confirmed by nearly all interviewees.

Madrasah principal M. Fauzi exhibits several leadership characteristics, based on Bass's (1999) framework, operationalized in the madrasah context by (Umam, 2021) which can be categorized as transformative. First, he encourages critical reflection: rather than simply giving instructions, he regularly invites teachers to question whether existing work methods are producing the best results for students. Second, he builds a shared vision: the process of reformulating the madrasah's vision and mission in 2021 was conducted in a participatory, not top-down, manner. Third, he tolerates experimentation and learns from failure an attitude that's unusual in educational institutions that tend to be risk-averse.

However, these findings also raise an undeniable question: what happens if this madrasah principal is replaced by a different leader? (Jaka Maulana et al., 2026) have warned about the vulnerability of quality systems that rely too heavily on a single figure. At MTs Salafiyah Bode, the system documentation process, although still in its early stages, is at least beginning to create an institutional memory that isn't entirely reliant on the memory and commitment of a single individual. This is an important first step toward a system that is more resilient to leadership changes, although the journey remains long.

Resource Limitations and Adaptation Strategies

One thing that sets research on private madrasas like MTs Salafiyah Bode apart from research on public schools or more established institutions is the impossibility of ignoring resource limitations. Nearly every strategy designed in this study had to pass a pragmatic filter: "Is this feasible with the existing budget and capacity?"

The findings show that resource limitations, while real, do not have to be a barrier that halts the process of quality improvement. Creativity in optimizing available resources is more crucial. The use of free cloud-based tools (Google Workspace for Education) to digitize documentation, leveraging the MGMP network for teacher professional development without additional training costs, and the active involvement of the madrasah committee as a partner

rather than a mere formality are examples of adaptations that demonstrate that budget constraints are not a reason to stop.

However, there is one area where resource limitations truly limit progress: the development of teachers' ICT competencies. Some senior teachers exhibit resistance that is not merely motivational, but driven by genuine anxiety about technology they have never used professionally (Winantra, 2025). Overcoming this requires an investment of time and patience that cannot be rushed and this is one of the real limitations of a principles-based approach without adequate resource support for intensive training.

Challenges of Cultural Change and Resistance

Implementing a quality management system is never solely a technical issue. It is also a cultural issue, and cultural issues are the most difficult to change, especially in institutions that have operated in a certain way for decades (Muhammad & Pd, 2021). MTs Salafiyah Bode is nearly six decades old, and over that long journey, habits, unwritten norms, and deeply ingrained perspectives on how madrasas should be managed have developed.

The resistance that most frequently emerged in this study was not overt rejection, but rather easier to manage. The most challenging resistance was passive and covert: agreeing to changes in meetings but continuing old practices in the field. Darwis dan Syahrial (2022) refer to this as pseudo-implementation, when organizational members know that a change is desired by the leadership, but they display compliance without truly changing their behavior (Gunawan, 2024). Overcoming this requires more than just instructions and documents; Consistent monitoring mechanisms are needed, appreciation for small, tangible changes, and, most importantly, proof that the requested changes actually result in improvements directly felt by teachers and students.

In this context, small successes, such as easier access to digital attendance data or faster semester report preparation, serve as "social proof" that the changes are truly beneficial, not just an additional burden. Developing and communicating quick wins like these is part of a change management strategy that must not be overlooked by madrasah principals who want to maintain the momentum of transformation.

Implications for Private Madrasah Development Policy

The findings of this study have several policy implications worth considering. First, the Ministry of Religious Affairs' approach to developing private madrasahs needs to move beyond its compliance-driven accreditation orientation. While accreditation is important as a public accountability mechanism, it does not always drive true process improvement (Wahyudi & Hasri, 2025). Integrating the principles of ISO 21001, or at least the spirit of the standard, into madrasah supervisor development programs could be a more organic way to encourage continuous quality improvement.

Second, madrasah principal competency development programs need to focus more on transformative leadership and systems-based management, rather than solely on administrative management. Madrasah principals who are able to build and implement quality systems without being solely responsible for everything are the most valuable assets for private madrasah institutions with limited resources.

Third, there is a clear need for ISO 21001 implementation guidance specifically contextualized for Indonesian private madrasahs not a direct translation of the international

standard, but rather one that recognizes the limitations and uniqueness of private madrasahs and offers a realistic and gradual implementation path (Seruni et al., 2025). This could provide a meaningful research and development agenda for Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

This research yielded three interrelated conclusions. First, ISO 21001:2018 has proven to serve as an effective diagnostic and strategic framework for private madrasahs even before formal certification plans are in place. When used as a health map (rather than a compliance checklist), the standard helps madrasah leaders clearly identify the biggest gaps and where to start. The Planning (6) and Improvement (10) clauses proved to be critical points, the conditions of which most determine whether a madrasah moves systematically forward.

Second, the most effective quality improvement strategies in the context of madrasahs with limited resources are gradual, contextual, and begin with quick wins whose impact is immediately felt by the madrasah community. Launching large programs simultaneously without capacity readiness risks resulting in a pseudo-compliance implementation without real behavioral change.

Third, the transformative leadership of madrasah principals, capable of translating the technical principles of ISO 21001 into language and practices meaningful to teachers and staff, is a determining factor that transcends all other technical factors. However, this conclusion must be accompanied by a critical note: strong personal leadership needs to be accompanied by the development of a system that does not rely too much on individuals, so that the quality achieved can last beyond a leader's term of office.

Suggestion

For the leadership of MTs Salafiyah Bode, the most urgent step is to strengthen the planning and evaluation dimensions by formalizing the PDCA cycle in the annual work program. This doesn't have to be expensive; it simply means ensuring that each program included in the work plan includes specific and measurable success indicators and an evaluation schedule. These small steps will gradually shift the culture from "implementing programs" to "managing processes toward clear goals."

For the Cirebon Regency Ministry of Religious Affairs and madrasah development institutions, this study recommends incorporating an ISO 21001 principles-based approach into routine development programs, particularly in sessions to strengthen the competencies of madrasah principals and supervisors. An effective format is not a lecture on the standard, but rather a reflective workshop that helps madrasah principals diagnose their own institutional conditions using the ISO 21001 framework. For future researchers, two of the most pressing agendas are: a longitudinal study that tracks the long-term impact (at least two to three years) of an ISO 21001-based strategy on measurable quality indicators; as well as comparative studies across several private madrasas with different characteristics to identify universal versus context-specific factors.

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