

## LEADERSHIP WITHIN ISLAMIC SECONDARY SCHOOL: A STUDY TOWARDS PRINCIPALS' CHALLENGES

Zunaidi Harun, Muhammad Faizal A. Ghani, Abd. Muhith

University Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia,  
UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq, Jember, Indonesia

 [zunaidi.harun@gmail.com](mailto:zunaidi.harun@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims at exploring the Malaysian Islamic secondary school principals' leadership challenges. To respond to the study aim, a qualitative method using some series of interview were applied among seven leaders of Islamic Secondary Schools. The informers were selected based on some criteria such as the length of service as a leader and leadership knowledge. The data that were analyzed using thematic analysis reported seven challenges of Malaysian Islamic secondary school principals' leadership, namely: (i) lack of knowledge, in particular, the field of school management such as finance, IT, asset, data and information, (ii) lack of management skill to figure out conflicts regarding incentive differences among senior and novice teachers, (iii) lack of collaboration among stakeholders, (iv) need to allocate more finance for the program of competency development such as enhancing novice teachers' pedagogical skills, (v) lack of managing boarding students with the useful programs, (vi) less concern to support some Ministry of Education's policies, and (vii) less concern on the changing environment, in particular, the field of pedagogical changes for the post pandemic. The implication of this study is to be aware for the educational stakeholders, in particular, the school principals, to take into account this study findings in order to make self-improvement for enhancing the students learning and school achievement.

## INTRODUCTION

Effort after effort has been made by various stakeholders worldwide so that those responsible for education provide quality education and focus on the development of students' talents and skills as the main focus. These goals are implemented to ensure that the next generation remains relevant to the changing currents and needs of the current market. (

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UNESCO,2017) Therefore, if seen at the international level, UNESCO is actively promoting the provision of quality education and the development of students' skills to eradicate poverty. (UNICEF,2022) At the Malaysian level, Malaysia welcomes the effort because Malaysia is aware of its impact on national education. In fact, Malaysia in the PPPM 2013-2025 has previously focused on quality education and skills development. (KPM,2013) Earlier than that, starting in 1971, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was implemented. DEB is a comprehensive national development plan covering all areas, and education is one of the critical components of the plan. The main goal is to eradicate poverty and reorganize Malaysian society. (Yusof, H,2008)

However, efforts to provide quality education and develop students' talents, potential and skills or whatever policies/initiatives introduced by the government lack or fail to produce the targeted impact due to some specific obstacles, among these obstacles is the inefficiency of leadership. Rahimah Ahmad and Simin stated that the principal's role in ensuring that the organization continues to excel depends on the competence they have. (Ahmad et al.,2014) Supporting the view, if the competence is not there then it is certain that the policy and direction as well as the vision and mission are built impossible to achieve.

Therefore, a policy or initiative must be well understood and implemented by leaders at various levels, whether at the central level of the Ministry of Education, National Development, PPD and all schools, including high school principals. In the context of SMA, SMA leaders need to strive to achieve both of these goals to ensure that religious students can also compete in the market with students from other schools in the future. These things are in line with the goal of Islamic Education which is to provide skills, knowledge and develop demoted human being towards Allah SWT. (Muhamat, 2014) Accordingly, the goal of providing quality education and efforts to develop talent and potential, as well as the skills of SMA students will not be successful without efficient and effective leadership. This can be proven by many past studies that explain that there is a strong relationship between school success and school principalship. (Dewi, N. N., & Wibowo, R., 2020) This matter was also emphasized by Widhyanti that the competence of the school leader is the main basis for determining the level of success of the school. (R Widhyati Shahril,2016) However, certain parties dispute the leadership competence of Islamic school principals. Explaining the matter Muhammad Faizal A. Ghani et. al illustrated through their study that principals in National Religious Secondary Schools less practiced excellent school practices than SBP Principals. (R Widhyati Shahril,2016) The study reinforces Abdul Hamid Othman's view that the level of effectiveness of management and administration in Islamic schools is weak. (Othman Abdul Hamid,1992)

Likewise, based on the findings of the study by Muhammad Faizal A. Ghani et. al( A. Gani Faizal Muhammad & G. Crow,2013) and Abdul Hamid Othman which has been discussed above, it was found that there is a wide gap from the aspect of leadership competence of SMA leaders, their leadership is at a weak level. In addition, the gap can also be seen from the current aspect implemented in 1992 and implemented in 2013, which have exceeded 30 and 10 years, respectively, which is a relatively long period and it is possible that the findings are no longer relevant to the current developments and changes applies to the education system, especially SMA. (A. Gani Faizal Muhammad & G. Crow,2013).

Religious education in Malaysia is divided into several categories, namely Islamic schools under the control of the Ministry of Education and Culture such as SMKA, State Islamic schools (SAN), which are Islamic schools under the control of state religious

authorities and Kingdom Aid Islamic schools (SABK) which are jointly controlled by both by the Ministry of Education and Culture and state religious authorities or school management boards. (Amin, M. H., & Jasmi, K. A.,2012) All government Islamic schools implement the national curriculum, (Umar, A., & Hussin, S. ,(2008) while SAN and SABK implement the Early Curriculum and the National Curriculum The total number of Islamic schools under the Ministry of Education as of March 2021 is 284, of which 60 are National Religious Secondary Schools (SMKA), 181 Religious Secondary Schools (SM) Government Assistance (SABK) and 43 Primary Schools (SR) SABK Primary Schools. The KPM-run SMKA was originally also a SAN and SAR. However, starting in 1977, MoE took over 11 SAN and SAR. From 11, SMKA has grown, and now the total number of SMKA is 55. (KPM. ,2013).

## RESEARCH METHODS

The design of this study uses a qualitative method. In more detail, the researcher used a basic qualitative design which is one of the six qualitative research designs recommended by Merriam(Merriam, S. B.,2016) in addition to phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, narrative analysis and case studies. The basic qualitative design is appropriate for this study which aims to explore the challenges SMA leaders face. according to Creswell (Creswell, W. J.,2009) Qualitative research is a flexible research design and he does not specify specifically what and how qualitative research is to be conducted.

The purposive sampling technique used to selects six research samples with experience in the leadership field in SMA. This technique is the most appropriate because this study requires a qualified and experienced sample in SMA leadership. explained that this purposive sampling technique is a suitable sampling technique for qualitative research because it can provide information that required through knowledgeable individuals (Creswell, W. J.,2009); (Merriam, S. B.,2016). Muhammad Ridhuan Tony Lim, and Abdullah Rozaini Muhamad Rozkee (Saedah et al.,2020) as well as Mohd Ridhuan and Nurulrabihah. (Mohd Ridhuan, M. J., & Nurulrabihah, M. N.,2020) In relation to the total sample of six people, the amount is sufficient for this study. This is because the study of the number of samples in qualitative research is not emphasized, but what is emphasized is the extent to which the sample can help solve the research problem. (Merriam, S. B.,2016)

Data collection method used for this study was interview. Before administering the interview, the researcher first prepared some questions of the research focus. According to Creswell (Creswell, W. J.,2009) preparation and planning are important in qualitative research. The interview session was conducted based on a set of semi-structured interview protocols that were confirmed by three experts, namely language experts and leadership experts. The protocol is divided into three parts, namely (a) Opening Questions, this part focuses on the introduction of the study and consent to be a study participant, (b) Main Questions, which are questions related to challenges in SMA leadership, and (c) Closing Questions, in this part The researcher gave space to the study sample to submit any additional points that they wanted to highlight regarding SMA leadership. The development of this research protocol is based on the format used by Muhammad Faizal A.Ghani and Crow. (A. Gani Faizal Muhammad & G. Crow,2013) Merriam (Merriam, S. B.,2016) said there is no specific method for analyzing qualitative research data. Chua's view(Chua Yan Piaw.,2012) in line with Merriam's statement (Merriam, S. B.,2016) that there is no consensus among experts and qualitative researchers regarding qualitative data analysis methods. However, some other experts believe that to launch the analysis process the researcher needs to show the

procedures or steps of data analysis used, besides that it can be used as a guide for novice researchers so that it can be seen and understood. (Miles, M. B., & Michael Huberman.,1994)

All in all, this study used the thematic analysis method proposed by Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, and Braun (Terry, G,2019) (a) Make sense of the data (b) identify relevant statements (c) code (d) recode (e) form themes. A similar method was also used by Mile and Huberman(Miles, M. B., & Michael Huberman.,1994) The analysis they use involves ten processes, namely (a) collecting data, (b) preparing transcriptions and interpreting transcriptions, (c) data organization, (d) conditioning data (the process of understanding data), (e) alienating and filtering data, (f) coding, (g) themes and sub-themes, (h) demonstration of reliability and validity, and (i) reporting.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### Conflict Challenges Related to Incentive Differences Among Senior Teachers with Novice Teachers

The transformation of an organization will be more difficult if a leader tries to avoid conflicts and issues that arise in an organization. Therefore, to resolve conflicts and issues in SMA, SMA leaders need to have appropriate plans and strategies. This study found that there is a conflict related to the difference in incentives among teachers, some senior teachers receive lower incentives than novice teachers. This difference is due to the service policy set by the Public Service Department (JPA) which provides salaries and allowances equivalent to the academic qualifications of a civil servant. Participants of the first study stated that: *"The old teacher's salary...he has been working for seven years, eight years, ten years, before he entered SABK, his basic is 800 [ringgit], but for a new teacher, just enter the school, the starting basic is 2,200 [ringgit] something. In terms of salary...haa so that has started a conflict between them"* (P1: 141-143) More worryingly, the conflict is prolonged due to the lack of effort made by SMA leaders to understand the conflict more deeply. This is because, they lack the skills to identify the symptoms and causes that cause a conflict.

### Less Networking and Interweaving with Stakeholders

As in other fields, leaders in the field of education need to establish constructive networks and connections with stakeholders to make a school more competitive and effective. Educational networks and connections can be held across various stakeholders such as parents, communities, government agencies, the private sector, international institutions. However, the results of the research conducted in this study have found that there are still a number of high school principals who lack networking in organizing programs at the school level. Involvement is only limited to their group within the scope of a specific location or a specific country, and is not open to the outside world which is more global. This matter was explained by the participants of the first study as follows: *"He has an issue, we [SABK} are not global, he is only in that group of countries"* (P1: 141-143) The views of the participants of the first study were reinforced by the views of the participants of the fifth study. He stated that the efforts of some SMA leaders are still not extensive in establishing a network. Just like the views of the participants of the first study, the participants of the fifth study also stated that the networking held by SMA leaders is limited to their group only. In other words, the statements of the two study participants illustrate that some SMA leaders have an *asabiyyah*

attitude based on Islamic schools' sentiments according to specific locations and states. The first study participant expressed his concern about this.

### **The Need to Provide More Financial Allocations for Teacher Competence Development**

Some of previous studies have clearly stated that the academic achievement of students in a school depends on the competence of teachers in various aspects. Among the main and important aspects of teacher competence in the world of education is teaching and learning pedagogy. This challenge was recorded based on statements by the participants of the second study as follows: *"Most of the teachers we hire don't have a degree in education. When they want to teach, they don't know what pedagogy is. What is an induction set? so they don't know. When we send our teachers out for courses or meetings, they feel inferior."* (P2: 233-235) However, the ability of high school teachers in teaching and learning pedagogy is different when compared to teachers from mainstream schools. This is because the background of high school teachers is different, some of them are untrained teachers, therefore, this matter becomes a challenge for high school principals to find allocations for the purpose of teacher competency development to ensure that teaching and learning are delivered in a more effective way.

### **Lack of Beneficial Programs Planning for Boarding Students**

Some high schools provide dormitory facilities in order to reduce the burden of traveling for out-of-town students to attend school. In relation to that, school principals must manage the school dormitory efficiently to ensure that the goal of building the dormitory can have an impact on the student's development. However, this study has found that there are weaknesses in the management of school hostels. The weakness has caused students to take advantage engage in non-profitable activities such as recording dance videos, the videos are uploaded in the TikTok application. *"...he [the teacher] never prays in congregation with the students [in the dormitory]... because if you look at this Islamic school, most of them have dormitories right! if there is no dormitory, at least he organizes his schedule to be with his students during zohor and so on. This needs to be highlighted... called the visibility of his presence"*(P7: 208-213) The challenge was also raised by the seventh study participant who stated that it is very difficult for teachers to spend time with students in the dormitory. Discussing the matter, the seventh study participant raised two issues, firstly the importance of teachers to be together with students in dormitory activities, and the second is the arrangement of dormitory activities on a schedule.

### **Lack of Support for MoE's Policy Achievements**

The success of the National Education Philosophy is dependent on the extent to which the educational policy enacted by the Ministry of Education and Culture is in line with the philosophy, and also the extent to which a policy is implemented to achieve success as stated in the statement of a policy. Therefore, SMA leaders are part of the policy implementers at the micro level. They must implement each policy as best as possible to ensure that the policy is able to have an impact on the students.

However, the challenge to the implementation of policy that exists in the leadership of SMA is that some of the leaders lack support for the implementation of education policy. This study found that they are less diligent and proactive in arranging more creative and out-of-the-box strategies in the implementation of an educational policy at the school level. Not

only that, some of them were also found to be less supportive of the creative strategies planned by their teachers in implementing a policy. Among the factors that cause SMA leaders to give less proactive support to the implementation strategy of education policy is due to SMA leaders being appointed with less experience. This point is based on the statement of the participants of the first study who stated that the appointment of some SMA leaders was made by direct appointment without going through any specific screening to identify the experience and qualifications of the leader.

Here are the statements of the first study participants: "...he [the leader] just continued to appoint one shot and he was appointed as principal..." (P1: 141-143) In another statement, the participants of the first study also stated that the appointment of SMA leaders is heavily influenced by elements of nepotism or family inheritance rather than qualifications and competence.

He stated that: "...there is no SABK...there is no interview, nothing, the son of the owner [of the school] continues to be appointed as principal, [or] it seems that he has a little talent and continues to be appointed as principal, and he will remain in that school as principal, be a leader," (P1: 111-114) In addition, due to some intended interests of the high school principals appointment, it is made in a one shot manner as mentioned above, the participants of the first study also stated that SMA leaders are also appointed from among very young individuals. The statements of the participants of the first study are as follows: "...he was appointed as principal even at a very young age..." (P1: 107) The seventh participant explained that one of the factors that cause SMA leaders to be less supportive of policy implementation is because of the leader's own attitude. He stated that SMA leaders are less critical and less use data as a basis in making decisions.

The establishment of Islamic schools in Malaysia was initially based on preaching activities by Muslim travelers since the 10th and 15th centuries AD. (Kayadibi, S., & Buang, A. H.,2011) Atiqah and Liu (Atiqah, T. A., & Liu, O. P.,2018) explained that education in this country has a close relationship with the history of the development and spread of Islam. The Malays at that time already had their own education system pioneered by travelers from India and Arabia. in an informal form that is through the institution of lodges and madrasahs. As a classic proof, the famous Muslim traveler Ibn Batutah recorded that the Islamic boarding school system was first built in Pasai in the 14th century. (Kayadibi, S., & Buang, A. H.,2011) Then, after the arrival of Western colonialists, education in Malaya began to change according to the pattern desired by the British colonialists. (Kayadibi, S., & Buang, A. H.,2011) Now, Malaysia has many types of schools, one of which is Islamic schools. In general, Malaysia is one of the countries with the best education system including religious education. This matter is explained in the World Economic Forum 2019 report that Malaysia as a country that has a better level of competition in the field of education than 141 countries around the world in 2018. (WEF. ,2019)

The first challenge, SMA leaders lack knowledge and competence in financial management, assets, ICT, and data and information. Ogunbado and Omar ( Ogunbado et al.,2016) explain that effective leaders are a person with knowledge. Through knowledge, a leader can clearly know the appropriate form of decision to be taken to solve an issue. Therefore, more specifically Zawawi Zakaria and Yahya Don et al. (Zawawi, Z., Yahya, D., & Mohd Faiz, M. Y.,2020) explained that knowledge in key management fields such as financial management, effective communication, leadership and so on is one of the important knowledge required by a school leader. They added that knowledgeable leaders are able to

reduce the conflict that exists between school principals and teachers, and are able to help create a more harmonious school atmosphere.

Hence, the mastery of knowledge is important towards the formation of effective high school principals. High school principals who are effective are ready to spread their knowledge to be used by teachers to boost the excellence of school achievement. (Pont, B, et al.,2008) Discussing leadership in Islamic schools, it is necessary for high school principals to master both knowledge and skills in either Islamic leadership or conventional leadership introduced by Western scholars. This matter is supported by Mobarak(Mobarak, H. , 2016) which states that Islamic leaders should always identify the gaps in knowledge that exist and then fill those gaps. From another aspect, Azizi Umar, Jamsari Ezad and Wan Zulkifli et al. (Azizi Umar, & Supyan Hussin., 2012) in their study they have found that one of the reasons why high school principals lack knowledge is due to the lack of formal training given at the beginning of their appointment. The study of Azizi Umar, Jamsari Ezad and Wan Zulkifli et al. (Azizi Umar, & Supyan Hussin., 2012) was made on the leaders in SABK.

In short, high school principals should always look for space and opportunities to improve their knowledge and skills in certain fields based on their needs. They should always make Training Need Analysis (TNA) or Training Needs Analysis to make high school principals comparable to mainstream school principals network, and this can at once erode the negative perception of the community and academics towards the level of professionalism of high school teachers and leaders.

Second Challenge is related to the difference in incentives between senior teachers and novice teachers. This conflict can be seen more clearly among some high school teachers from the SABK type. The salary rate of some senior teachers at SABK is lower than that of novice teachers. This conflict arises because some senior teachers are untrained teachers, they were absorbed into the government service after their original school changed its status to SABK. Most of the senior teachers are untrained permanent teachers who are also known as backup teachers and allowance teachers. They cannot participate in public service schemes provided by the Federal Government. This is because they do not have academic qualifications as stipulated by JPA stating that 73.2% of SAR teachers do not have a degree, while 26.5% only have a Religious High School Certificate or SPM or Empat Thanawi only. Meanwhile, novice teachers are trained teachers who have higher academic qualifications and job grades than senior teachers. The determination of the salary rate and grade of the position is determined by the Public Service Commission (JPA). (Federal Constitution,1997)

Because of that, high school principals need to be more sensitive to the issue of incentives, salaries and grades for teacher positions. This is because the matter has the potential to raise serious conflicts among teachers. As explained by Pi and Zhang (Pi, J., & Zhang, P.,2017), conflicts that arise related to the employment of workers need to be controlled to avoid more severe social conflicts. If not controlled, it is feared that the conflict will have a negative impact on the quality of the leader's leadership and will further hinder the operation of the school. However, the authority of SMA leaders to control conflicts related to staffing or employment is limited. It should be understood that for SABK-type SMAs, jurisdiction related to staffing and salary rates is not under the jurisdiction of SABK leaders. They do not have the authority to adjust teachers' salaries. (Azizi Umar, & Supyan Hussin.,2012) In fact, the state government also no longer has absolute authority over the staffing of teachers at SABK because it is subject to the Enactment on the Control of Islamic schools(Azizi Umar, & Supyan Hussin.,2012) and the Education Act 1996. (Akta

Pendidikan,2018);(Azizi Umar, & Supyan Hussin.,2012). Such case happened after both parties agree on the contents of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for the change of school status to SABK. The MoU was made involving three parties, namely between the state government and the Ministry of Education, and between the school and the Ministry of Education. The content of the MoU varies according to the state. (Azizi Umar, & Supyan Hussin.,2009). The implication of the MoU is that the authority to create teacher positions for SABK is placed under the jurisdiction of the Federal Government which is under the Public Service Department (JPA). In line with the powers provided in Article 132 Clause (1) of the Federal Constitution: "Subject to the provisions of any existing law and to the provisions of this Constitution, it is the duty of a Commission referred to in this Section to appoint, confirm, include in permanent or pensionable positions, promote, change and carry out disciplinary control on the members for the service or services covered by his jurisdiction". However, for the People's Religious Secondary Schools (SMAR) and State Religious Secondary Schools (SMAN) that have not yet changed their status to SABK, matters related to staffing such as salary and promotion remain under the authority of the School Management Committee as usual. Meanwhile, the state authorities are considered as hosts or middlemen to outside parties who want to deal with SAR. (Azizi, A. B. et al.,2014)

Third Challenge is from the aspect of networking and interweaving, SMA leaders have less networking and interweaving with stake holders. Networking is an important element in the leadership of an organization. As explained by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Pont, B., Nusche, D., & Moorman, H.,2008), school principals need to involve themselves more actively to strengthen the network and interweaving of peers from other schools in the country and abroad, and with educational bodies or associations found in the local and international environment. The network and interweaving are held with the aim of empowering schools, teachers, parents and the community. Also, Davies and Davies(Davies, B., & Davies, B. J.,2010) states that in strategic leadership networking and interweaving is one of the most important and useful basic elements.

Therefore, based on the discussion above, high school principals need to organize a strategy to empower the school through the implementation of networks and interweaving towards producing students with high knowledge and skills. This is because through interweaving and networking, SMA leaders can generate new and more creative ideas in the implementation of school activities. (Davies, B., & Davies, B. J.,2010) Maalouf (Maalouf, G. Y.,2019) also believes that networks and connections can contribute to the success of an organization. This point is also supported by Brown and Timothy (Brown, A. H., & Timothy, G. D.,2016) which states that the topic of discussion about networks and interweaving is a popular topic in the world of education.

Fourth Challenge identified in this study found that SMA leaders are faced with the challenge of providing more financial allocations for teacher workforce development. High school principals who are most affected by this challenge are high school principals from the SMAR, SMAN and private SMA types. This happens because the teachers admitted to the school mostly have low academic qualifications and do not have specialist qualifications in education. (Azizi Umar, & Supyan Hussin.,2012) The statement is supported by data presented by Ilhaamie and Raudah et al. (2018), he stated that 73.2% of SAR teachers do not have a degree, while 26.5% only have a Religious High School Certificate or SPM or Empat Thanawi only. There is no doubt that there are a number of private SMAR, SMAN and SMA teachers



who are first degree holders, but most of them only make their career in the school as a temporary job before finding another job that pays more in line with their qualifications.

Nevertheless, this challenge is also faced by high school principals in government-aided schools in SABK. This situation occurs because some of the teachers who are absorbed into SABK are teachers who are not trained and do not have professional teaching qualifications. The Ministry of Education gives these people specialized teaching training to improve their level of professionalism. (KPM.,2020)

Therefore, it is the responsibility of SMA leaders to provide sufficient allocations. This is because the leader's job is to make his subordinates more knowledgeable and skilled. (Melum, M.,2002) In this case, SMA leaders are responsible for training untrained SMA teachers to improve their level of professionalism in some basic areas that have been identified such as pedagogy and so on. The World Economic Forum (2019) explains that insufficient allocation is the cause of an organization becoming less competitive. The forum also emphasized that the factor of lack of allocation is one of the causes of high-quality education, training and marketability of graduates is deteriorating. Because of that, the SMA leader should be a person who has a high commitment and is efficient in the school's financial management to ensure that the allocation of critical areas is sufficient.

The Fifth Challenge is High school principals are faced with challenges related to the lack of beneficial programs for boarding students. In other words, high school principals need to have strategic leadership skills to plan and implement dormitory programs that suit the needs of students. The boarding program is one of the important programs that need to be implemented in boarding schools. Ardiansyah(Ardiansyah, M. Z.,2019) explained the importance by stating that boarding school principals should have the ability to plan and implement the best boarding program to be part of the school's main program to produce moral and virtuous students. This is because morals and ethics are a reflection of a nation. Hasmayni et al. (Hasmayni et al., 2020) also commenting on this matter, he expressed his concern about the level of character and morals of school students, according to him, school students today come to school with an attitude and manners that are not pleasant.

In this regard, Sahid et al. (Sahid et al.,2021) through his research related to the implementation of extracurricular programs should be used as a guide by high school principals. He explained that in the implementation of extracurricular programs, there are several challenges, including getting the commitment of teachers and parents. This is because commitment from teachers and parents is an important basis for the effectiveness of extracurricular programs for boarding students. The next challenge is that extracurricular programs in boarding schools are not implemented according to proper procedures either in terms of compliance with modules or program implementation guidelines. Non-compliance with the guidelines has hampered the effectiveness of the hostel program and has caused the program's objectives to be unable to be achieved as targeted. The study also listed the lack of financial allocation and infrastructure facilities as factors hindering the development and implementation of the program. (Sahidet al.,2021)

The Sixth Challenge is SMA leaders are less supportive of KPM's policy achievement. This situation occurs due to several factors such as excessive workload, lack of training and preparation, limited career prospects and lack of support and rewards. (Pont, B., Nusche, D., & Moorman, H.,2008) Bridge et al. (Pont, B., Nusche, D., & Moorman, H.,2008) stating that the factors mentioned have caused teachers to be less interested in applying for the position of school principal. This point is also supported by Tintoré et al. (Tintoré et al.,2022) which

stated that one of the reasons why school principals find it difficult to implement a policy well is because the policy introduced is too complicated and school principals lack appropriate training.

The Seventh Challenge is related to the leadership challenges of SMA leaders in relation to their ability to respond to changes that occur in the environment. SMA leaders are seen as less concerned and less competent in dealing with the changes that occur in the environment. For example, changes that occur as a result of Industrial Revolution 4.0 (IR4.0) and the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic (Alfitri et al,2020)(Arlinwibowo et al,2020),(Klaus, S.,2018) (Schwartzman, R.,2020). (WEF. ,2020)

In this case, the change became a strong pressure and influence on the SMA leaders. Fotheringham et al. (Fotheringham et al.,2022) explained that the pressure and influence that existed in the early stages of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic had caused school principals to panic. They face difficulties in understanding and responding to plan teaching and learning strategies that are appropriate to the new situation and regulations enforced by the government. One of the examples of regulations enforced by the government is the closure of school operations.

Therefore, following the closing of schools, school principals face the challenge of providing remote teaching and learning. (Schwartzman, R.,2020) Various methods are used by the school to ensure the continuity of the teaching and learning process. Online teaching and learning methods are one of the methods that are often used. (Alfitri et al.,2020) However, this method faces difficult challenges due to a number of students who do not have devices, a less than satisfactory internet service network and so on. (Nor Musfirah Mohamad.,2021)

## CONCLUSIONS

This study clearly shows that SMA leaders are faced with several leadership challenges. The challenge hinders the effort to produce students with high knowledge and skills comparable to the skills achieved by other mainstream students. Therefore, a study that focuses on leadership challenges among high school principals is very important to enable improvement efforts to be implemented to improve the quality of leadership of high school principals. In relation to that, this study has identified seven main challenges that need to be addressed in improving the leadership quality of SMA leaders, namely, (i) lack of knowledge and competence in the field of school financial management, IT, assets, and data and information, (ii) less concerned with the conflict related to the difference in incentives between senior and novice teachers, (iii) lack of networking and interweaving with stakeholders, (iv) needing more financial allocations to fund teacher competency development programs, for example teacher pedagogy skills improvement programs (v) lack of planning beneficial programs for boarding students, (vi) lack of support for the implementation of education policies introduced by the Ministry of Education, and (vii) lack of concern for environmental changes in the field of education such as the COVID19 pandemic. Therefore, through the findings of this study, stakeholders can identify the cause of the challenge and then plan improvement strategies so that the mission and vision of SMA can be achieved and then be able to produce knowledgeable and highly skilled students.

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