

Multicultural Leadership in Islamic Boarding School Education: Strategies for Accommodating Children's Ethnic Learning Needs in

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Received: 17-05-2026

Revised: 30-06-2026

Accepted: 18-07-2026

Info Artikel

Abstract

Keywords:

Multicultural Leadership, Inclusive Education, Islamic Boarding Schools, The Inner Tribe, Indigenous Students, Adaptive Learning

This study examines the implementation of multicultural leadership in accommodating the learning needs of Suku Anak Dalam (SAD) students at Pondok Pesantren Riyadhushshalihin, Sarolangun Regency, Jambi Province. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation involving the pesantren leader, teachers, boarding administrators, and indigenous students. The findings indicate that the pesantren implemented inclusive and humanistic leadership practices by promoting equal educational access, cultural sensitivity, emotional support, and non-discriminatory learning environments. Adaptive learning strategies, including flexible instructional methods, simplified communication, continuous mentoring, and gradual social integration, enabled indigenous students to participate more effectively in educational activities while fostering their emotional adjustment. These practices also strengthened tolerance, intercultural understanding, and social inclusion within the pesantren community. This study contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence on how multicultural leadership can support inclusive education for indigenous students within the context of Indonesian Islamic boarding schools, an area that remains underexplored. However, the findings are limited to a single-case study conducted in one pesantren and therefore cannot be generalised to all educational settings. Future research is recommended to examine multicultural leadership across different pesantren or other educational institutions using comparative or mixed-method approaches to obtain broader insights.

Kata Kunci:

Kepemimpinan Multicultural, Pendidikan Inklusif, Pesantren, Suku Anak Dalam, Siswa Adat, Pembelajaran Adaptif

Abstrak.

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis implementasi kepemimpinan multikultural dalam mengakomodasi kebutuhan belajar siswa Suku Anak Dalam (SAD) di Pondok Pesantren Riyadhushshalihin, Kabupaten Sarolangun, Provinsi Jambi. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi yang melibatkan pimpinan pesantren, guru, pengurus asrama, serta siswa dari komunitas Suku Anak Dalam. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pesantren menerapkan praktik kepemimpinan yang inklusif dan humanis melalui pemberian akses pendidikan yang setara, penguatan dukungan emosional, sensitivitas terhadap latar belakang budaya, serta penciptaan lingkungan belajar yang bebas dari diskriminasi. Selain itu, strategi pembelajaran adaptif diterapkan melalui metode pembelajaran yang fleksibel, penyederhanaan komunikasi, pendampingan secara berkelanjutan, dan integrasi sosial secara bertahap sehingga mampu meningkatkan partisipasi belajar serta membantu proses adaptasi emosional siswa. Praktik tersebut juga berkontribusi dalam membangun toleransi, penerimaan sosial, dan pemahaman antarbudaya di lingkungan pesantren. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi empiris terhadap pengembangan kajian kepemimpinan pendidikan multikultural dengan menunjukkan bagaimana kepemimpinan pesantren dapat

mendukung pendidikan inklusif bagi masyarakat adat di Indonesia. Namun demikian, penelitian ini terbatas pada satu lokasi penelitian sehingga hasilnya belum dapat digeneralisasikan ke seluruh pesantren atau lembaga pendidikan lainnya. Oleh karena itu, penelitian selanjutnya disarankan melibatkan lebih banyak lokasi penelitian atau menggunakan pendekatan komparatif maupun metode campuran (mixed methods) untuk memperoleh pemahaman yang lebih komprehensif mengenai implementasi kepemimpinan multikultural dalam berbagai konteks pendidikan.

INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) have long played a significant role in the Indonesian educational system, serving not only as institutions for Islamic learning but also as centres for character formation, social integration, and cultural transmission.(Leithwood, 2020; Shields, 2018). In recent years, *pesantren* have increasingly been expected to promote inclusive education by responding to the diverse cultural, social, and educational needs of students from different backgrounds. As educational institutions embedded within local communities, *pesantren* possess the potential to foster equitable learning environments that respect cultural diversity while strengthening religious and moral values.(Usep et al., 2026; Warisno et al., 2025). This role has become increasingly important as inclusive education is recognised as a fundamental strategy for reducing educational disparities and promoting social justice within multicultural societies.(Abidin & Lisa, 2026; Triyanto, 2026).

Indonesia's multicultural society, characterised by hundreds of ethnic groups, languages, and cultural traditions, presents both opportunities and challenges for educational institutions.(Banks, 2021; Grant & Sleeter, 2018; Nieto, 2017). Managing this diversity requires educational leadership that is capable of fostering inclusion, mutual respect, and equal participation for all learners. Multicultural leadership, therefore, extends beyond administrative responsibilities by emphasising cultural responsiveness, equity, and respect for students' diverse identities.(Sleeter, 2018; Triyanto, 2026). Within Islamic educational institutions, leaders are expected to develop adaptive educational policies and learning environments that accommodate students with different cultural experiences while promoting peaceful coexistence and social cohesion.(Fauzia, 2013; Kholish et al., 2026).

Educational inequality remains a major concern for many indigenous communities in Indonesia, particularly the *Suku Anak Dalam* (SAD), a semi-nomadic indigenous group primarily residing in the forest areas of Jambi Province.(UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2022; United Nations, 2021). Despite government initiatives to improve educational access, indigenous children continue to encounter barriers related to geographical isolation, limited educational infrastructure, economic constraints, and cultural differences. These conditions often hinder their participation in formal education, where standardised learning systems frequently fail to accommodate indigenous learning characteristics and sociocultural realities.(Abidin & Lisa, 2026; Ministry of Social Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023). Consequently, educational institutions require culturally responsive approaches that integrate local wisdom, flexible learning strategies, and social inclusion to ensure equitable educational opportunities for indigenous learners.(Futaqi & Mashuri, 2022; Usep et al., 2026).

Within this context, *pesantren* offer considerable potential to function as inclusive educational institutions because of their flexible learning traditions, communal living systems, and value-oriented educational culture.(Booth & Ainscow, 2016; Grant & Sleeter, 2018). The success of such inclusive education, however, largely depends on the leadership of the *kyai*, who shapes institutional policies, educational culture, and interpersonal relationships within the *pesantren*. The

findings of previous studies suggest that multicultural leadership encourages culturally sensitive educational practices, promotes emotional support, and facilitates students' social adaptation in diverse educational settings.(Fauzia, 2013; Futaqi & Mashuri, 2022). Likewise, inclusive leadership has been shown to strengthen tolerance, collaboration, and peaceful interaction among students from different cultural backgrounds.(Kholish et al., 2026; Triyanto, 2026).

Previous studies have discussed multicultural education, inclusive educational management, and leadership within Islamic educational institutions from various perspectives. Existing research has mainly focused on curriculum innovation, religious moderation, institutional transformation, and digital adaptation in pesantren.(Habibi, 2025; Warisno et al., 2025). Other studies have examined the multicultural education conceptually or explored inclusive educational values in Islamic schools.(Abidin & Lisa, 2026; Usep et al., 2026). Nevertheless, empirical studies specifically investigating how multicultural leadership is implemented to accommodate the learning needs of indigenous students, particularly the *Suku Anak Dalam*, within pesantren environments remain very limited. Consequently, there is still insufficient understanding of the practical leadership strategies employed to create culturally responsive and inclusive educational environments for indigenous learners.(Khalifa et al., 2016; Shields, 2018).

Therefore, this study aims to examine multicultural leadership practices in Islamic boarding school education by analysing the strategies employed by leaders of Pondok Pesantren Riyadhushshalihin, Sarolangun Regency, Jambi Province, in accommodating the learning needs of *Suku Anak Dalam* students. This study contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence on the implementation of multicultural leadership within pesantren for indigenous education, thereby extending current discussions on inclusive educational leadership in culturally diverse contexts. The findings are expected to enrich the theoretical development of multicultural educational leadership while offering practical insights for policymakers, educational leaders, and Islamic educational institutions seeking to strengthen inclusive education for indigenous communities in Indonesia.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design to explore the implementation of multicultural leadership in accommodating the learning needs of *Suku Anak Dalam* (SAD) students at Pondok Pesantren Riyadhushshalihin, Sarolangun Regency, Jambi Province. A qualitative case study was considered appropriate because it enables researchers to obtain an in-depth understanding of leadership practices, educational interactions, and cultural dynamics within their natural setting.(Solihin & Yakin, 2024). The case study approach also allows the investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident.(Yin, 2018). This research focused on understanding how multicultural leadership was implemented to support indigenous students' educational participation within the pesantren environment. (Anderson et al., 2014).

Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Participant observation was conducted to examine leadership practices, classroom interactions, and students' social adaptation within the pesantren. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with purposively selected informants consisting of the pesantren leader, teachers, boarding administrators, and *Suku Anak Dalam* students who were directly involved in the educational process. (Adams & van Manen, 2017). Documentation, including institutional profiles,

educational programs, photographs, and administrative records, was used to complement and verify the findings obtained from observations and interviews. (Anderson et al., 2014). To enhance the credibility of the findings, source triangulation and method triangulation were employed by comparing information obtained from different participants and data collection techniques. (Muhajir et al., 2025).

The collected data were analysed using the interactive model proposed by (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Miles et al., 2020), which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data condensation involved selecting, simplifying, and organising relevant information related to multicultural leadership practices and educational accommodation strategies. (Miles et al., 2014). The organised data were subsequently presented in narrative and thematic forms to facilitate interpretation. (Bernard et al., 2016; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Finally, conclusions were continuously verified throughout the research process by comparing emerging findings across different data sources to ensure consistency, credibility, and trustworthiness.

Table 1. Research Informants

Informant Code	Informant	Status	Function in the Study
INF-01	Head of Pesantren (<i>Kyai</i>)	Key Informant	Provided information regarding multicultural leadership policies, institutional vision, and decision-making processes.
INF-02	Teacher 1	Supporting Informant	Explained teaching strategies and classroom adaptation for <i>Suku Anak Dalam</i> students.
INF-03	Teacher 2	Supporting Informant	Described learning implementation, student participation, and instructional adjustments.
INF-04	Boarding Administrator	Supporting Informant	Explained mentoring practices, students' social adaptation, and daily activities in the dormitory.
INF-05	<i>Suku Anak Dalam</i> Student 1	Main Informant	Shared personal experiences regarding learning adaptation and educational participation.
INF-06	<i>Suku Anak Dalam</i> Student 2	Main Informant	Described perceptions of the learning environment, social interaction, and cultural adaptation within the pesantren.

Source: Data Collection, 2026

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

Inclusive Leadership Orientation in Pesantren Education

Field observations revealed that the leadership practices implemented at Pondok Pesantren Riyadhushshalihin reflected an inclusive orientation toward educational access for marginalised communities, particularly students from the *Suku Anak Dalam* (SAD). The pesantren accepted indigenous students regardless of their social, economic, or cultural background and provided equal opportunities to participate in educational, religious, and social activities. During the observation, the researcher found that interactions between the pesantren leaders, teachers, and indigenous students were characterised by respect, openness, and a non-discriminatory attitude, indicating that inclusivity had become an integral part of the institutional culture.

Furthermore, the researcher observed that educational policies were implemented through adaptive rather than rigid administrative procedures. Indigenous students were gradually introduced to the pesantren environment according to their readiness and learning capacities. Rather than expecting immediate conformity, the pesantren emphasised personal guidance and emotional support, allowing students to adapt naturally to communal life. These observations indicate that multicultural leadership was not merely reflected in institutional policies but was consistently practised in everyday educational interactions.

My leadership strategy is grassroots, meaning that it reaches those who need education the most. We welcome everyone, not only families with financial means, but also orphans, underprivileged children, and our brothers and sisters from the Suku Anak Dalam community who wish to pursue Islamic education. (INF-02).

The strategy implemented in this pesantren is intended to embrace everyone. Specifically for students from the Suku Anak Dalam community, we use a gradual and humanistic approach that is adjusted to their individual characteristics because their educational background and social experiences differ from those of other students. (INF-04).

Document analysis further confirmed the pesantren's commitment to inclusive education. Internal administrative records and student enrollment documents demonstrated that admission policies did not differentiate students based on ethnicity, economic status, or cultural background. Institutional records also showed that indigenous students were formally registered as regular members of the pesantren community and participated in both academic and boarding activities. Additional documentation, including photographs of learning activities, mentoring schedules, and institutional reports, illustrated that indigenous students were consistently involved in religious learning, Qur'anic recitation, and communal programs alongside other students.

These documents support the observation that inclusive leadership was implemented through institutional policies as well as daily educational practices. Taken together, the observation, interview, and documentary evidence indicate that the leadership model at Pondok Pesantren Riyadhushshalihin is characterised by inclusive educational values grounded in equality, social responsibility, and cultural sensitivity. Rather than perceiving indigenous students as passive recipients of educational services, the pesantren positions them as equal members of the educational community whose diverse backgrounds are respected throughout the learning process.

Table 2. Multicultural Leadership Practices at Pondok Pesantren Riyadhushshalihin

Leadership Practices		Implementation in Pesantren
Inclusive Educational Access		The pesantren provided educational opportunities for <i>Suku Anak Dalam</i> students regardless of their social and cultural background.
Humanistic Leadership Approach		The pesantren leader emphasised empathy, patience, emotional closeness, and persuasive communication in guiding indigenous students.
Non-Discriminatory Educational Policy		Indigenous students were treated equally and encouraged to participate in all educational and social activities within the pesantren.
Adaptive Educational Leadership		The leadership adjusted educational strategies according to students' learning capacities and cultural characteristics.
Teacher Coordination and Evaluation		Regular meetings were conducted to discuss students' progress, learning obstacles, and appropriate educational approaches.
Emotional and Social Support		Teachers and dormitory administrators provided intensive mentoring to support students' emotional adaptation.

Cultural Accommodation		The pesantren respected the cultural background of <i>Suku Anak Dalam</i> students during the adaptation process.
Gradual Integration	Social	Indigenous students were gradually introduced to communal activities to strengthen social interaction and confidence.

Source: Processed from field observation and interview data (2026).

Following the triangulated findings from observations, interviews, and institutional documents, the multicultural leadership implemented at Pondok Pesantren Riyadhusshalihin can be characterised by inclusive educational access, adaptive leadership practices, culturally responsive communication, and continuous mentoring. These interconnected practices contributed to creating an educational environment that supported the academic participation, emotional well-being, and social inclusion of *Suku Anak Dalam* students.

Humanistic Approaches to Adaptive Learning Strategies

One of the most prominent findings in this study is the implementation of humanistic leadership approaches toward *Suku Anak Dalam* students. The pesantren leadership emphasised emotional closeness, empathy, patience, and persuasive communication in interacting with indigenous students. This approach was considered necessary because many SAD students initially experienced difficulties adapting to structured educational systems due to differences in lifestyle, communication habits, and prior educational exposure. The findings show that teachers and boarding administrators were encouraged to prioritise emotional understanding rather than authoritarian discipline. Indigenous students who experienced difficulties in learning or social adaptation were approached gradually through personal interaction and continuous guidance. This humanistic strategy enabled students to feel psychologically secure and reduced feelings of alienation within the pesantren environment.

In practice, the pesantren attempted to create familial relationships between educators and students. Daily interactions were characterised by informal communication, supportive mentoring, and collective activities aimed at strengthening trust between indigenous students and the pesantren community. Such conditions contributed positively to the emotional adjustment and self-confidence of SAD students during their adaptation process. The study also found that the pesantren implemented adaptive learning strategies specifically designed to accommodate the educational needs of SAD students. During the initial adaptation stage, indigenous students were placed in separate learning groups to create a more comfortable and less intimidating educational atmosphere. This policy was intended to reduce anxiety and facilitate gradual adaptation to formal learning environments.

Teachers adjusted instructional methods according to the students' literacy levels, communication abilities, and learning capacities. (INF-01)

Educational materials were delivered using simpler language and contextual explanations to help students understand lessons more effectively. (INF-05)

In addition, teachers demonstrated flexibility in classroom management and instructional pacing. Learning activities were not solely focused on academic achievement but also emphasised emotional adaptation, participation, and confidence-building among indigenous students. This adaptive strategy reflected the pesantren's effort to create educational practices that were culturally responsive and socially supportive. The findings further indicate that regular evaluations and teacher coordination meetings were conducted to discuss the progress and challenges experienced by SAD students. Through these evaluations, the pesantren leadership continuously monitored

the effectiveness of educational strategies and encouraged collaborative problem-solving among educators.

The findings revealed that Pondok Pesantren Riyadhusshalihin implemented several adaptive learning strategies to accommodate the educational needs of *Suku Anak Dalam* students. These strategies were designed to support students' academic participation, emotional adjustment, and social adaptation within the pesantren environment. The adaptive approaches included flexible classroom arrangements, simplified instructional methods, personalised communication, and continuous mentoring processes. Such strategies aimed to create a more inclusive and culturally responsive learning atmosphere for indigenous students.

Table 3. Adaptive Learning Strategies for Suku Anak Dalam Students

Adaptive Learning Strategies		Implementation in the Learning Process
Separate Learning Groups	Initial	<i>Suku Anak Dalam</i> students were temporarily placed in separate classes during the early adaptation stage to create a more comfortable learning environment.
Simplified Materials	Learning	Teachers delivered instructional materials using simpler language and contextual explanations adjusted to students' literacy levels.
Flexible Approach	Teaching	Learning activities were adapted according to students' educational background, comprehension abilities, and learning pace.
Personalized Communication		Teachers used persuasive and emotionally supportive communication to strengthen students' confidence and participation.
Gradual Adaptation	Social	Indigenous students were progressively involved in collective pesantren activities to support social integration.
Continuous Mentoring		Teachers and dormitory administrators provided intensive guidance during both academic and non-academic activities.
Collaborative Evaluation		Regular coordination meetings were conducted to evaluate students' progress and discuss learning challenges.
Confidence-Building Activities		Students were encouraged to participate actively in learning and communal activities to improve self-confidence and emotional adjustment.

Source: Processed from observation, interview, and documentation data, 2026

Social Integration and Cultural Accommodation

Another important finding concerns the process of social integration and cultural accommodation within the pesantren environment. Although indigenous students initially learned separately, the pesantren gradually encouraged interaction between SAD students and regular students through collective religious activities, communal events, and dormitory life. This gradual integration strategy aimed to foster social adaptation without creating excessive psychological pressure on indigenous students.

The pesantren leadership also attempted to respect the cultural characteristics of SAD students during the adaptation process. Rather than forcing immediate conformity to institutional culture, educators provided sufficient time and support for students to adjust naturally to pesantren life. Such approaches reduced cultural shock and helped students maintain emotional stability during their educational transition.

The interaction between indigenous students and the broader pesantren community also contributed to the development of tolerance, empathy, and multicultural awareness among students. Through daily social interaction, students learned to appreciate differences in cultural background, communication style, and social behaviour. Consequently, the pesantren

environment evolved into a socially inclusive educational space that supported intercultural understanding and harmonious coexistence.

Challenges in Implementing Multicultural Leadership

Despite the positive implementation of multicultural leadership practices, the study identified several challenges faced by the pesantren in accommodating the learning needs of *Suku Anak Dalam* students. One major challenge involved differences in communication patterns and learning habits between indigenous students and the formal educational environment. Some students initially experienced difficulties understanding instructional materials, following classroom discipline, and adapting to structured daily schedules.

Another challenge concerned the limited educational background and literacy skills of some indigenous students. These conditions required teachers to invest additional time, patience, and emotional energy in the learning process. Furthermore, social adaptation occasionally became difficult because some students tended to feel shy, withdrawn, or uncomfortable interacting with broader social groups during the early stages of adaptation.

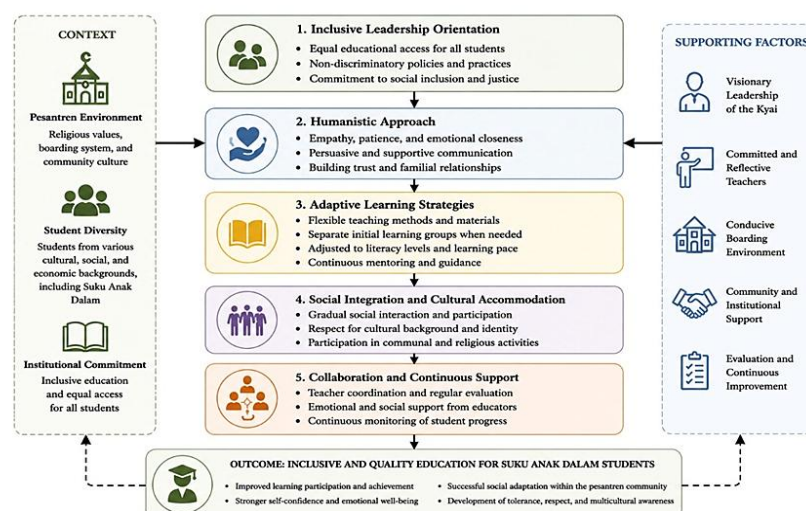
The pesantren also encountered limitations in educational resources and specialised training related to indigenous education and multicultural learning strategies. Nevertheless, the leadership attempted to address these challenges through collaborative teacher discussions, continuous mentoring, and adaptive educational approaches centred on students' social and emotional needs.

Implementasi kepemimpinan multikultural di pesantren menghadapi tantangan berupa perbedaan pola komunikasi, kebiasaan belajar, dan terbatasnya kemampuan literasi awal siswa Suku Anak Dalam. (INF-01)

Untuk mengatasi hal tersebut, pendidik menerapkan pendekatan humanis, pendampingan emosional yang intensif, serta strategi pembelajaran adaptif guna mendukung integrasi sosial dan partisipasi pendidikan mereka. (INF-04)

Overall, the findings demonstrate that multicultural leadership at Pondok Pesantren Riyadhushshalihin was implemented through inclusive policies, humanistic interaction, adaptive learning strategies, and gradual social integration processes. These practices contributed significantly to supporting the educational participation and social adaptation of *Suku Anak Dalam* students within the pesantren environment.

Figure 1. Multicultural Leadership Model in Accommodating the Learning Needs of Suku Anak Dalam Students



The figure above illustrates the implementation model of multicultural leadership at Pondok Pesantren Riyadhusshalihin in accommodating the learning needs of Suku Anak Dalam students. The model highlights the integration of inclusive leadership orientation, humanistic approaches, adaptive learning strategies, and social integration processes in creating an inclusive educational environment for indigenous learners.

DISCUSSION

Multicultural Leadership as Inclusive Educational Leadership

This finding is consistent with the theory of multicultural educational leadership, which emphasises that educational leaders are responsible for creating equitable learning environments by recognising cultural diversity as an educational resource rather than an institutional challenge. (Banks, 2019; Khalifa et al., 2016). From this perspective, multicultural leadership requires school leaders to move beyond managerial responsibilities and actively promote culturally responsive educational policies that reduce educational inequalities among marginalised learners. Similarly, (Shields, 2018). The present findings support these theoretical perspectives by demonstrating that multicultural leadership within the pesantren was operationalised through institutional decisions that prioritised equal educational opportunities for indigenous students. (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2016).

The empirical findings also corroborate previous studies conducted in Islamic educational contexts. (Futaqi & Mashuri, 2022) argue that multicultural leadership in pesantren should integrate spiritual values, cultural sensitivity, and social responsibility to create harmonious educational communities. Likewise, (Warisno et al., 2025) found that contemporary pesantren leadership increasingly combines traditional Islamic values with inclusive educational management to address changing social conditions. However, while these studies mainly discuss multicultural leadership from conceptual and managerial perspectives, they provide limited empirical explanation of how inclusive leadership is translated into daily educational practices involving indigenous learners. (Theoharis, 2007).

The findings of this study also complement broader discussions on inclusive education. (Abidin & Lisa, 2026) emphasise that inclusive educational institutions should avoid standardised educational practices that overlook students' diverse cultural experiences. Instead, educational leaders should encourage flexible learning environments that accommodate different educational needs and learning trajectories. Similarly, (UNESCO, 2020) highlights that educational inclusion should be interpreted as the continuous process of eliminating barriers that prevent vulnerable groups from accessing meaningful educational participation. Despite these similarities, the present study offers several important distinctions from previous research. Most existing studies examine multicultural leadership within public schools or focus on inclusive educational policies at the institutional level, whereas empirical evidence concerning indigenous students in Islamic boarding schools remains limited (Futaqi & Mashuri, 2022).

Accordingly, this study contributes to the development of multicultural educational leadership literature by extending its application to indigenous education within pesantren contexts. (Bishop et al., 2003). The findings demonstrate that multicultural leadership should be conceptualised as an integrated educational process combining institutional commitment, adaptive leadership practices, culturally responsive pedagogy, and humanistic interaction. This perspective broadens the current understanding of multicultural leadership beyond administrative governance

and highlights its potential as an educational strategy for promoting social inclusion and educational equity among indigenous communities in Indonesia (Futaqi & Mashuri, 2022).

Humanistic Leadership and Culturally Responsive Education

From the perspective of culturally responsive leadership, these findings suggest that effective educational leadership should acknowledge students' cultural identities as valuable assets rather than barriers to learning. Culturally responsive leaders are expected to develop educational environments that respect diversity, eliminate discriminatory practices, and adapt instructional processes to learners' cultural experiences. (Khalifa et al., 2016). Similarly, Gay argues that culturally responsive education requires educators to understand learners' sociocultural backgrounds and integrate such understanding into daily teaching practices. The findings of this study extend these perspectives by demonstrating that culturally responsive leadership within the pesantren context is operationalised through emotional mentoring, gradual adaptation, and personalised communication, rather than relying solely on curriculum modification or institutional policy (Gay, 2018).

These findings are broadly consistent with previous studies emphasising the importance of culturally responsive educational leadership. (Khalifa et al., 2016) argue that school leaders should actively promote equity by recognising students' cultural realities and addressing structural barriers that hinder educational participation. Likewise, (Futaqi & Mashuri, 2022) found that multicultural leadership in Islamic educational institutions should integrate spiritual values with humanistic educational practices to strengthen social harmony and educational inclusion. However, the present study provides a different empirical perspective by illustrating how these leadership principles are translated into everyday interactions within a pesantren that educates indigenous learners. Rather than focusing on organisational management alone, this study highlights the importance of emotional accompaniment, patient communication, and continuous mentoring as practical manifestations of culturally responsive leadership. (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

Another important distinction concerns the educational setting itself. Most previous studies on culturally responsive leadership have been conducted in public schools or multicultural urban educational environments, whereas empirical research involving indigenous students within Islamic boarding schools remains relatively limited. (Nieto, 2017). The present findings demonstrate that pesantren possess distinctive characteristics that support culturally responsive leadership, including communal living, intensive teacher-student interaction, and value-based education rooted in Islamic ethics. These characteristics enable educational leaders to implement individualised mentoring and social integration more intensively than is generally possible in conventional school settings. (Paris & Alim, 2017). Consequently, multicultural leadership within pesantren should be understood not merely as an administrative framework but as a holistic educational process integrating academic guidance, moral development, emotional support, and cultural accommodation.

Theoretically, this finding enriches the discourse on multicultural educational leadership by demonstrating that humanistic leadership and culturally responsive education are mutually reinforcing concepts within indigenous educational contexts (Tomlinson, 2017). While previous literature primarily conceptualises culturally responsive leadership as a framework for addressing diversity in mainstream educational institutions, this study shows that its implementation in pesantren requires additional dimensions of emotional accompaniment, cultural adaptation, and community-based mentoring (Gay, 2018). Therefore, the findings contribute to extending existing

theories by positioning humanistic leadership as an essential mechanism through which culturally responsive educational practices can effectively support marginalised indigenous learners within faith-based educational institutions.

Adaptive Learning Strategies for Indigenous Students

From the perspective of adaptive learning theory, instructional adaptation should be understood as a continuous process of aligning educational practices with learners' individual needs, prior knowledge, and learning capacities. (Tomlinson, 2017) argues that differentiated instruction enables teachers to respond effectively to learner diversity by modifying content, instructional processes, and learning environments according to students' readiness and learning profiles. Likewise, (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) emphasise that inclusive pedagogy requires teachers to move beyond uniform instructional approaches and instead create learning opportunities that accommodate differences without marginalising particular groups. The findings of this study strongly support these theoretical perspectives, demonstrating that adaptive learning was achieved through flexible pedagogical practices that respected the educational characteristics of indigenous students rather than requiring them to conform immediately to conventional classroom expectations.

An important aspect emerging from this study is that instructional adaptation was accompanied by continuous emotional and social support. Teachers did not merely simplify learning materials but also adjusted communication styles, instructional pacing, and classroom interactions according to the students' psychological readiness. This finding suggests that adaptive learning within indigenous educational contexts cannot be separated from emotional accompaniment and culturally sensitive communication. Consequently, the success of adaptive learning depended not only on instructional modification but also on the establishment of trusting relationships between teachers and students.(Paris & Alim, 2017). This finding reinforces the argument that inclusive pedagogy should integrate cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of learning to ensure meaningful participation for all learners. (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Gay, 2018).

The findings are also relevant to the broader discourse on indigenous education, which consistently emphasises that educational systems should recognise indigenous knowledge, cultural identity, and local learning traditions. Previous studies have shown that indigenous learners frequently experience educational exclusion because mainstream educational institutions often employ standardised curricula and instructional practices that inadequately reflect indigenous cultural realities (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). As a result, indigenous students commonly encounter difficulties in academic participation, classroom engagement, and social adaptation. In contrast, the adaptive learning strategies implemented at Pondok Pesantren Riyadhusshalihin illustrate an alternative educational model in which instructional practices are modified to correspond with learners' cultural backgrounds while maintaining institutional educational objectives (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Although these findings are broadly consistent with previous studies on inclusive education, the present research offers several important distinctions. Existing studies generally conceptualise adaptive learning within the context of digital technologies, personalised learning systems, or differentiated classroom instruction(OECD, 2020). By contrast, this study demonstrates that adaptive learning within a pesantren serving indigenous students is primarily rooted in cultural responsiveness and humanistic educational relationships. The instructional modifications

observed in this research were not technology-driven but were implemented through simplified communication, gradual learning progression, individualised mentoring, and flexible classroom arrangements. These findings, therefore, extend the concept of adaptive learning beyond technological innovation by positioning cultural adaptation as an equally important dimension of educational responsiveness (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Overall, this study contributes to the growing literature on adaptive learning and inclusive pedagogy by demonstrating that adaptive instructional practices within indigenous educational settings should extend beyond curriculum modification to encompass emotional support, cultural accommodation, and gradual social integration. (United Nations, 2021). While previous studies primarily examine adaptive learning in formal school systems or technology-enhanced environments, the present findings highlight the importance of culturally responsive pedagogical adaptation within Islamic boarding schools (Paris & Alim, 2017). This contribution broadens the theoretical understanding of adaptive learning by emphasising that educational responsiveness is fundamentally rooted in teachers' capacity to recognise, respect, and accommodate learners' cultural identities throughout the educational process.

Social Integration as an Outcome of Multicultural Leadership

From the perspective of multicultural education, social integration represents one of the principal objectives of inclusive educational practices. (Banks, 2021) argues that multicultural education should create educational environments where students from diverse cultural backgrounds experience equal opportunities, mutual respect, and active participation in school life without losing their cultural identities. Similarly, (Gay, 2018) emphasises that culturally responsive educational environments promote social cohesion because they encourage students to recognise diversity as an educational asset rather than a source of social division. The findings of the present study strongly support these theoretical perspectives, demonstrating that social integration emerged through continuous interpersonal interaction, emotional acceptance, and culturally respectful educational practices implemented by pesantren leaders and teachers (Bordas, 2012).

The findings also correspond with the concept of social inclusion, which views educational participation as extending beyond academic achievement to encompass equitable access, interpersonal relationships, and meaningful involvement in institutional life. According to (Ainscow, 2012) Inclusive education requires educational institutions to remove barriers that prevent learners from participating fully in educational and social activities. Likewise, (UNESCO, 2020) emphasises that educational inclusion should involve structural, cultural, and social transformation to ensure that marginalised learners experience equal opportunities for participation. The present study illustrates these principles in practice, as indigenous students were progressively involved in communal worship, dormitory activities, extracurricular programs, and peer interactions while receiving continuous emotional support throughout the adaptation process (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006).

Compared with previous research, these findings offer several important contributions. Earlier studies on multicultural education in Islamic boarding schools generally focused on religious moderation, tolerance education, curriculum development, and institutional policy. (Futaqi & Mashuri, 2022; Warisno et al., 2025). Other studies on indigenous education primarily examined barriers to educational access, educational inequality, or governmental interventions for indigenous communities without paying substantial attention to social integration within educational institutions. (Abidin & Lisa, 2026). Consequently, relatively limited evidence has been

available regarding how educational leaders facilitate indigenous students' integration into multicultural learning communities through everyday educational practices.(United Nations, 2015). The present study addresses this gap by demonstrating that social integration is achieved not through cultural assimilation but through gradual accommodation, interpersonal trust, and inclusive institutional culture.

The communal culture of the pesantren further strengthened this integration process. Daily collective worship, shared meals, dormitory life, and cooperative religious activities created continuous opportunities for intercultural interaction that rarely occur within conventional day-school settings. These social experiences encouraged indigenous students to participate actively while simultaneously fostering empathy, tolerance, and mutual respect among regular students. Such findings support (OECD, 2023), which emphasises that inclusive educational environments contribute to learners' social well-being when educational institutions intentionally cultivate positive interpersonal relationships and collaborative learning cultures. Therefore, multicultural leadership should be viewed not only as an administrative function but also as a mechanism for building socially cohesive educational communities (Ramthun & Matkin, 2012).

Nevertheless, the findings also indicate that social integration remained a gradual and dynamic process. Differences in communication styles, cultural habits, and previous educational experiences occasionally limited students' confidence during the early stages of adaptation (Zander & Butler, 2010). However, these challenges were progressively addressed through continuous mentoring, persuasive communication, and collaborative support from teachers, dormitory administrators, and peers (Ramthun & Matkin, 2012; Theoharis, 2007). This demonstrates that effective multicultural leadership requires sustained institutional commitment rather than isolated educational interventions. Social inclusion is therefore achieved through continuous interaction, relationship-building, and culturally responsive educational practices rather than through formal institutional regulations alone (Bordas, 2012).

Table 4. Research Contribution and Novelty

Research Aspect	Previous Studies	Findings of This Study	Research Contribution
Multicultural Leadership	Mainly conceptual discussions on multicultural leadership in educational institutions (Banks, 2021; Futaqi & Mashuri, 2022).	Leadership was implemented through inclusive policies, humanistic mentoring, adaptive instruction, and social integration.	Provides an empirical multicultural leadership model for indigenous education within pesantren.
Inclusive Education	Focuses on educational access and inclusive policy implementation.	Inclusion was achieved through emotional support, gradual adaptation, and culturally responsive learning practices.	Extends inclusive education by emphasising socio-cultural accommodation rather than access alone.
Adaptive Learning	Generally associated with differentiated instruction and technology-supported learning (Tomlinson, 2017).	Adaptive learning emphasized cultural adjustment, simplified communication, mentoring, and flexible instruction.	Broadens adaptive learning theory by introducing cultural adaptation as its central dimension.
Indigenous Education	Mostly discusses educational inequality and	Examines how multicultural leadership accommodates	Fills an empirical gap regarding indigenous

	access among indigenous communities.	indigenous learners within an Islamic boarding school.	education in pesantren settings.
Social Integration	Previous studies discuss multicultural interaction conceptually.	Social integration occurred gradually through communal life, religious activities, and collaborative learning.	Demonstrates that social inclusion is an educational outcome of multicultural leadership.

Source: Developed by the Authors Based on the Findings of this Study (2026).

The present study contributes to the growing body of literature on multicultural educational leadership by providing empirical evidence from the context of indigenous education within an Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*). The findings of this study, therefore, extend existing knowledge by demonstrating that multicultural leadership is implemented through an integrated framework consisting of inclusive leadership orientation, humanistic educational relationships, adaptive learning strategies, and gradual social integration (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2016). These interconnected dimensions form a culturally responsive leadership model that supports both educational participation and social inclusion for *Suku Anak Dalam* students (F. M. Ali & Bagley, 2015).

Theoretically, it proposes an integrated multicultural leadership framework that connects inclusive leadership, adaptive pedagogy, humanistic educational relationships, and social integration within indigenous education. Practically, the findings provide a reference for policymakers, school leaders, and educators seeking to design culturally responsive educational systems that accommodate marginalized communities without neglecting their cultural identities (N. Ali & Noor, 2019; Zander & Butler, 2010). The novelty of this research therefore lies in demonstrating that multicultural leadership is not merely an administrative approach but a comprehensive educational process capable of promoting educational equity, cultural accommodation, and sustainable social inclusion within Islamic boarding schools (Zander & Butler, 2010).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that multicultural leadership at Pondok Pesantren Riyadhusshalihin plays a vital role in accommodating the learning needs of *Suku Anak Dalam* (SAD) students through inclusive, humanistic, and culturally responsive educational practices. The findings reveal that the pesantren implemented multicultural leadership by ensuring equal educational access, adopting adaptive learning strategies, providing continuous emotional and academic support, and facilitating gradual social integration for indigenous students. These leadership practices enabled the pesantren to create an inclusive learning environment where indigenous students were able to participate academically while maintaining positive social relationships and adapting to the pesantren culture. The study, therefore, confirms that multicultural leadership in Islamic boarding schools extends beyond administrative responsibilities and functions as a transformative approach that promotes educational equity, cultural accommodation, and social inclusion for marginalised communities.

This study contributes to the development of multicultural educational leadership literature by providing empirical evidence of how inclusive leadership is implemented in a pesantren to accommodate the educational needs of indigenous students, a context that has received limited

scholarly attention in previous studies. Practically, the findings offer insights for educational leaders, policymakers, and Islamic educational institutions in designing culturally responsive and inclusive learning environments for marginalised communities. However, this study was limited to a single case at one Islamic boarding school, which may restrict the transferability of the findings to other educational contexts. Therefore, future research is recommended to investigate multicultural leadership across different pesantren or other educational institutions using comparative case studies or mixed-method approaches to obtain a broader understanding of inclusive leadership practices for indigenous and culturally diverse learners.

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