

**REVISITING EARLY CHILDHOOD ISLAMIC EDUCATION LEADERSHIP  
THROUGH MARIA MONTESSORI'S VISION OF AN INCLUSIVE AND  
PREPARED ENVIRONMENT**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This article aims to reconstruct the concept of leadership in Early Childhood Islamic Education (ECIE) through a philosophical reading of the concept of the prepared environment developed by Maria Montessori. Until now, ECIE leadership has tended to be understood within an administrative and managerial framework, often disconnected from the pedagogical experiences of children. This approach has limited the implementation of inclusivity, which often stops at the policy level rather than actual practice in the learning environment. This research uses a qualitative approach based on literature review with philosophical and hermeneutic analysis of key Montessori literature, inclusive leadership theory, and Islamic education studies. Data were analyzed through a process of concept reduction, thematic categorization, and reflective synthesis to develop a new conceptual framework. The study's primary focus lies in the shift in leadership paradigm from authority to design of learning environments. The results show that the concept of the prepared environment offers a strong theoretical basis for understanding leadership as a design practice that directly shapes children's learning experiences. The environment is positioned as an active medium that enables the realization of inclusivity in a concrete, rather than merely normative, manner. In the context of ECIE in Indonesia, this approach has the potential to be integrated with Islamic educational values, despite facing cultural, structural, and resource challenges. This article contributes to the development of Islamic educational leadership theory by emphasizing the importance of environmental design as a core practice of contextual and reflective inclusive leadership.*

**Keywords:** *Early Childhood Islamic Education Leadership, Maria Montessori, prepared environment*

**A. Introduction**

Leadership in Early Childhood Islamic Education (ECIE) has been largely understood within an administrative and managerial framework, particularly as it relates to institutional management, teacher

coordination, and compliance with institutional standards (Maryani, Wibowo, Mua'arifah, & Handayani, 2025a; Sere, Suryana, & Fikri, 2025; Syukron et al., 2025). While this perspective is important, in practice, it often leaves a gap between the

policies formulated by leaders and the learning experiences children actually experience (Masnipal & Yugo, 2025; Siswadi, 2025b). At this point, leadership is not fully present as a force shaping the quality of pedagogical interactions, but rather functions more as a regulator of systems outside the learning environment. This situation raises fundamental questions about the extent to which leadership in ECIE is able to concretely internalize the values of inclusivity, not only in policy documents but also in children's daily experiences in the educational environment.

The discourse on inclusive leadership in education has expanded significantly over the past two decades, particularly in efforts to address the diversity of student backgrounds (Murwanto, 2024; Racelino Ratulangi & Piring, 2025). In the context of Early Childhood Islamic Education, inclusivity is not only related to accepting differences in abilities or social conditions, but also concerns how each child is positioned as a subject with unique potential for development. However, inclusive approaches are often understood within the framework of formal access

and participation, such as admitting students from diverse backgrounds or providing basic facilities (Long & Guo, 2023). More subtle dimensions, such as how learning environments are designed to accommodate each child emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually, have not yet fully become a primary focus in leadership practice.

This gap indicates that inclusive leadership in Early Childhood Islamic Education requires a more in-depth and integrative approach, particularly one capable of bridging the institutional vision with the pedagogical realities of the classroom. In this regard, the learning environment cannot be viewed as a passive element that merely supports the learning process, but rather as an active medium that shapes children's experiences. A well-designed environment can foster independence, a sense of security, and engagement, while a less structured environment can actually hinder children's development, even if the curriculum and teaching staff meet certain standards. Therefore, the discussion of inclusive leadership needs to be expanded to include the dimension of environmental design as an integral part of leadership practice.

In this context, Maria Montessori's thinking offers an interesting perspective worth reexamining. Montessori positioned the environment as a key element in the educational process, serving not merely as a setting but as a "silent teacher" actively shaping children's behavior and development (Maria Montessori, 1913). The concept of the prepared environment she developed emphasized the importance of spatial arrangement, material selection, and interaction arrangements that enable children to learn independently and meaningfully (Maria Montessori, 1948; Siswadi, Jamil, & Afandi, 2026). In this view, the environment is not simply a physical space, but rather an ecosystem consciously designed to support a child's holistic development.

Although Montessori's thinking has been widely adopted in early childhood education practices, its use tends to be limited to pedagogical aspects at the classroom level, such as learning methods or the use of teaching aids. Meanwhile, the philosophical implications of the prepared environment concept for educational leadership have been relatively rarely explored systematically. However, if explored

further, this concept holds the potential to reformulate the role of educational leaders, from one focused on control and instruction to one focused on designing environments that enable inclusive and meaningful learning. Within this framework, leadership is no longer understood as a practice centered on an authoritative figure, but as a design process involving the organization of space, time, interactions, and values. Early childhood education leaders are not only tasked with ensuring the program runs smoothly but are also responsible for the quality of the environment in which children interact and learn. This shift in perspective is crucial, particularly in efforts to build a truly inclusive education system, where every child is not only formally accepted but also facilitated to develop according to their characteristics and needs.

On the other hand, the context of Early Childhood Islamic Education as part of Islamic education presents additional dimensions that require consideration. Islamic values, such as respect for the natural innate nature of children, the balance between cognitive and spiritual aspects, and the importance of etiquette in

interactions, align with Montessori's principles. However, integrating the two cannot be done simplistically. Critical and reflective reading is required to adapt these concepts contextually without losing their respective philosophical roots.

To date, studies on ECIE leadership have tended to focus on institutional management, curriculum development, or principal competency (N. Sari & Munastiwi, 2023; Wibowo & Wakhudin, 2021). Meanwhile, studies linking leadership to learning environment design, particularly through a Montessori perspective, remain very limited. This limitation suggests considerable room for developing a new, more integrative approach that not only combines leadership theory and pedagogy but also links them to more fundamental philosophical dimensions.

Against this backdrop, this article aims to reconstruct the concept of leadership in Early Childhood Islamic Education through a rereading of Montessori's thinking, particularly the concept of the prepared environment. This reconstruction is not intended as a direct adoption, but rather as an attempt to develop a conceptual framework more relevant to the

context of Early Childhood Islamic Education. By placing the environment at the center of the analysis, this article seeks to demonstrate that inclusive leadership can be understood as a design practice that consciously shapes children's learning experiences.

The primary focus of this study is an effort to shift the leadership paradigm from an authority-based approach to an environment-based one. This shift is expected to contribute to the development of leadership theory in Islamic education, while also offering a new perspective for ECIE management practices. More broadly, this approach also opens up the possibility of understanding inclusivity not merely as a normative principle, but as a reality realized through concrete and purposeful environmental design.

Thus, this article not only seeks to fill a gap in the literature but also offers an alternative perspective on leadership in ECIE. Through a philosophical and conceptual approach, it is hoped that a more comprehensive understanding of the role of leaders as architects of learning environments, actively shaping

conditions that enable each child to grow and develop optimally.

## **B. Method**

This study employed a qualitative approach with a conceptual development-oriented library research approach. The choice of library research was not solely based on limited field data, but rather on the need to deeply examine the philosophical and theoretical foundations underlying the concept of inclusive leadership in Early Childhood Islamic Education. In this context, the research focused on reading, reviewing, and reconstructing key ideas from various literature sources, particularly those related to the thinking of Maria Montessori and theories of educational leadership and Islamic education.

The approach used in this research is philosophical with hermeneutic nuances. The philosophical approach is used to explore the basic assumptions that shape the concepts of leadership and learning environments, including how they are understood within different traditions of thought. Meanwhile, the hermeneutic approach is used to interpret primary texts contextually, so

that their meanings are not understood literally, but rather in relation to the underlying social, historical, and epistemological contexts. Thus, the analysis process does not stop at conceptual descriptions but continues to understand the deeper structures of meaning and the potential for their transformation in the context of Early Childhood Islamic Education.

The data sources in this research consist of two main categories: primary sources and secondary sources. Primary sources include Montessori's key works that directly address the concept of the prepared environment, the role of educators, and her views on child development. Among the primary references are *The Montessori Method* and *The Absorbent Mind*, both of which contain conceptual frameworks regarding the relationship between the environment and children's learning processes. Secondary sources included literature discussing inclusive leadership, early childhood education, and Islamic education studies, including journal articles, academic books, and research reports. Sources were selected selectively, considering their relevance, credibility, and contribution

to the development of the analytical framework.

Data collection was conducted through documentation study, which involved identifying, classifying, and organizing various literature sources relevant to the research focus. This process involved intensive reading of texts, noting key concepts, and exploring the relationships between ideas emerging in various sources. In this stage, researchers not only collected information but also began to develop an initial understanding of thought patterns that could serve as a basis for further analysis.

Data analysis was conducted through several interrelated stages. The first stage was concept reduction, which is the process of filtering and sorting ideas deemed most relevant to the research focus. At this stage, concepts such as inclusive leadership, prepared environment, and the role of the environment in early childhood education were identified and formulated in a more focused manner. The second stage was categorization, in which the reduced concepts were grouped into specific themes based on similar meanings or functions. This categorization helps to see the relationships between concepts and

identify common ground that can form the basis for theoretical reconstruction.

The next stage is interpretation and synthesis. In the interpretation stage, the researcher interprets the meaning of the categorized concepts, considering their philosophical and pedagogical contexts. Meanwhile, synthesis is carried out by integrating the various concepts into a more comprehensive framework. This process is not mechanical, but rather reflective, as it involves critical consideration of the appropriateness and limitations of each concept when applied to the context of Early Childhood Education. The outcome of this stage is the formation of a conceptual construction of environment-based leadership informed by Montessori thought.

To maintain the validity of the study, this research applies the principles of thoroughness in source selection and consistency in the analysis process. Triangulation is carried out theoretically by comparing different perspectives, both from Western literature and Islamic education studies. Furthermore, transparency in the analysis process is maintained by systematically

documenting the steps of interpretation and synthesis, allowing readers to trace the logic used in constructing the arguments.

Through this methodological approach, the research aims not only to explain existing concepts but also to generate new, more integrative understandings. The reconstruction carried out is expected to contribute to the development of leadership theory in Early Childhood Islamic Education, especially that based on environmental design as the main medium in realizing inclusivity.

### **C. Result and Discussion**

#### **Inclusive Leadership in Early Childhood Islamic Education: Conceptual and Practical Gaps**

The discourse on inclusive leadership in Early Childhood Islamic Education often begins with the assumption that educational institutions must accommodate the diversity of students (Maryani, Wibowo, Mua'arifah, & Handayani, 2025b). This diversity can encompass social backgrounds, economic conditions, cognitive abilities, and even the special needs that accompany child development. Conceptually, inclusive leadership is understood as the

leader's ability to create a just, open, and participatory space for all members of the institution (Ashikali, Groeneveld, & Kuipers, 2021; Cohen, 2023; Randel et al., 2018; Siswadi, 2025a). However, when this concept is applied to the practice of ECI, tensions emerge between the ideals promoted by the discourse of inclusivity and the operational realities of institutions, which are still shaped by administrative and structural logic.

One fundamental problem lies in how inclusivity itself is understood. In many cases, inclusivity is reduced to a matter of access. An institution is considered inclusive when it welcomes children from diverse backgrounds or provides basic facilities for children with special needs. This approach is certainly not entirely wrong, but it tends to stop at the surface. Inclusivity, in a more substantial sense, should directly impact children's learning experiences, including how they interact with their environment, how they feel accepted, and the extent to which their potential can develop without structural or cultural barriers (Azzahra, Diana, Nirwana, Wiranata, & Andriani, 2022).

This is where leadership plays a more complex role than simply policymaking. Early childhood education leaders are responsible not only for the sustainability of the institution but also for the quality of the children experience (Chodijah et al., 2026; Siswadi, Asdlori, & Masruri, 2026). However, in practice, leadership is often positioned as a managerial function oriented toward compliance with standards, whether set by the government or accreditation bodies (Groenewald et al., 2024; Siswadi, Zain, Roqib, & Masruri, 2025). As a result, attention to the more subtle pedagogical dimensions is marginalized (Abbate, 2010; Fonsén & Lahtero, 2024). The classroom is seen as the teacher's domain, while leaders are positioned at a higher level and separated from the dynamics of daily learning.

This disconnect creates a gap between the vision of inclusivity articulated in formal documents and actual practices on the ground. An institution may have a vision statement emphasizing inclusive values, but in practice, it still maintains a uniform pattern of interaction and is less responsive to the individual needs of children (Aisy & Aprilia, 2025;

Mbazi, Okwaput, Nato, & Emong, 2025). In such situations, inclusive leadership loses its transformative power because it is unable to reach the spaces where inclusivity should be concretely realized.

Criticism of this situation is often directed at the leader's lack of competence in understanding the concept of inclusivity in depth. However, such criticism needs to be read more carefully. The problem lies not solely with the individual leader, but also with the conceptual framework used to understand leadership itself. As long as leadership remains understood within a hierarchical and control-based framework, the space for developing more organic inclusive practices will always be limited (Coddington & Goldberg, 2023; Grégoire, Delalieux, & Fatien, 2022). Within such a framework, inclusivity tends to be imposed through policy, rather than growing from an environment designed to foster more equitable interactions.

In the context of Early Childhood Islamic Education as part of Islamic education, this issue becomes even more complex. On the one hand, there are normative values that emphasize

justice, compassion, and respect for children's natural abilities. These values are conceptually aligned with the principle of inclusivity. However, institutional practices are often still influenced by top-down leadership patterns that lack dialogue. This tension between values and practices suggests that inclusivity is not adequately understood as a normative principle but needs to be translated into more concrete forms of practice.

One weakness in early childhood Islamic education leadership practices is the lack of attention to the role of the environment as the primary medium for inclusivity (Alnuaimi, Opoku, & Nketsia, 2025). The learning environment is often viewed as a technical aspect related to facilities and resources, rather than as an integral part of the leadership strategy. Yet, the environment plays a significant role in shaping children's experiences. The layout of the space, the choice of materials, and the interaction patterns facilitated by the environment can determine whether a child feels accommodated or marginalized.

The lack of attention to this dimension indicates a conceptual gap in understanding the relationship

between leadership and pedagogy. Inclusive leadership should not only address who is involved in the educational process, but also how that process is designed and implemented. When the environment is not consciously designed to accommodate diversity, inclusivity will be difficult to achieve, even if the institution has formally adopted inclusive principles.

Within the broader discourse, there is criticism that inclusive approaches often carry assumptions derived from Western contexts and are not always aligned with the context of Islamic education. This criticism cannot be entirely dismissed, especially if inclusivity is understood normatively without considering cultural and religious contexts. However, rejecting inclusivity altogether is also not a productive option. More relevant is a critical reading of the concept and its contextual adaptation.

In this regard, a dialogical approach is crucial. Inclusivity does not need to be positioned as a standalone concept, but can be integrated with the values of Islamic education, which have long emphasized respect for human

diversity. The challenge lies in how these values are translated into concrete leadership practices. Without this effort, inclusivity will remain at the level of rhetoric.

Another frequent criticism is that the focus on inclusivity can obscure the need to maintain educational quality standards (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024). There are concerns that efforts to accommodate all children will actually reduce the quality of learning because attention becomes too scattered. This criticism needs to be addressed by demonstrating that inclusivity is not synonymous with lowering standards, but rather demands a more adaptive and responsive approach (Mutaqin, Riyanto, Sholeh, Khamidi, & Amalia, 2024). Educational quality is not measured by uniformity of outcomes, but by the system's ability to support the optimal development of each child.

In this context, inclusive leadership demands the ability to manage complexity, not simplify it. Leaders need to be able to understand diverse needs and design strategies that are not uniform. This is certainly not easy, especially in situations where resources are limited. However, this is where it is crucial to shift the

focus from controlling the process to designing an environment that allows for flexibility and adaptation.

Further, the gap between the concept and practice of inclusive leadership in early childhood Islamic education demonstrates the need for a rethinking of leadership itself. Leadership can no longer be understood as an administrative function or even merely as an interpersonal skill. It needs to be understood as a practice involving design, reflection, and direct engagement with the pedagogical process. Without this shift, inclusivity will remain ambiguous, conceptually acknowledged but difficult to implement.

By examining these limitations, it becomes clear that developing inclusive leadership in ECCE requires a more integrative and reflective approach. The gaps are not only implementation issues, but also conceptual issues concerning how leadership, pedagogy, and the environment are understood and connected to one another. It is in this space that reconstruction efforts become relevant, especially those that shift the focus from policy to experience, from structure to

relationships, and from control to design, allowing inclusivity to grow more organically.

### **Montessori's Prepared Environment: Philosophical Foundations and Educational Implications**

The discussion of the prepared environment in Maria Montessori's thinking cannot be separated from a broader philosophical foundation regarding the nature of children and the learning process. Montessori viewed children as individuals with an internal drive to develop, not as passive objects waiting to be shaped by adults (Maria Montessori, 1949). This perspective positions learning activities as a natural process, in which children actively interact with their environment to build understanding. Within this framework, the environment is no longer merely a neutral backdrop, but becomes an element with an epistemological function, because it is through the environment that children gain experiences that shape their cognitive and affective structures.

The concept of a prepared environment stems from the assumption that optimal child development occurs when the

environment is consciously structured to support these developmental needs (Luh, Astuti, & Sandra, 2021; Rudenskyi, 2024). This environment encompasses various aspects, from spatial layout and material availability to the rhythm of activities that allow children to move freely yet remain directed. Freedom in this context is not unlimited, but rather structured freedom, which provides space for children to choose activities according to their interests without losing sight of the desired developmental direction.

Philosophically, this idea critiques educational models that are overly teacher-centered. In traditional models, teachers are often positioned as the primary source of knowledge and controller of the learning process (Bhardwaj, Zhang, Tan, & Pandey, 2025; Fauzi, Yunjiati, Muyassaroh, Pratama, & Zamani, 2025). Montessori shifts this center of gravity toward the environment. The teacher retains a crucial role, but more as an observer and facilitator, ensuring that the environment functions as intended (Maria Montessori, 1912). This shift has profound implications, as it challenges the assumption that learning must always be directly mediated by adult authority.

However, shifting the role from the teacher to the environment does not eliminate pedagogical responsibility. On the contrary, it becomes more complex. The environment must be designed with a certain degree of precision to effectively stimulate a child's development. The materials used must be developmentally appropriate, the layout must allow for safe mobility, and the interactions within must support the development of independence. In this context, the environment can be understood as a form of embodied pedagogy, where educational values are embodied in concrete forms and can be directly experienced by children.

While this concept may seem ideal, a number of criticisms have been raised against the Montessori approach, particularly regarding the assumption of the universality of child development. Some argue that this approach places too much emphasis on a presumed uniform developmental pattern, making it less sensitive to cultural and social variations (de Souza, 2025; Yadav, Lal, & Shastri, 2023). These criticisms are valid and worthy of consideration, particularly when the concept of the prepared

environment is adopted in contexts different from its historical setting.

However, these criticisms do not necessarily invalidate the relevance of the Montessori concept. What is more important is how the concept is interpreted and adapted contextually. The prepared environment should not be understood as a rigid model, but rather as a principle that can be interpreted according to the needs and values prevailing in a particular context. In this regard, flexibility is key. The prepared environment is not a uniform environment across all settings, but rather an environment designed with the characteristics of the child and the community in which they live in mind.

Another frequent criticism concerns the potential reduction of the teacher's role. There are concerns that the emphasis on the environment could diminish the direct interaction between teacher and child, which is crucial to the educational process (Yates, 2024). From this perspective, interpersonal relationships are seen as an irreplaceable element of environmental design. This argument highlights the relational dimension of education that cannot be fully

represented by physical structures or materials.

In response to this criticism, it is important to emphasize that within the Montessori framework, the teacher's role is not eliminated but redefined. The teacher is no longer the center of attention but remains present as a figure sensitive to the child's needs. Interaction between teacher and child still occurs, but in a more subtle and less dominant manner. The teacher observes, intervenes when necessary, and ensures that the environment remains conducive to the child's development. In this sense, interpersonal relationships are not eliminated but rather integrated into a broader system that includes the environment as an active element.

The educational implications of the prepared environment concept are quite broad. First, this approach demands a shift in how we view the learning process. Learning is no longer understood as the transfer of knowledge, but as a process of construction that occurs through interaction with the environment. Second, this approach emphasizes the importance of independence as an educational goal. Children are encouraged to take initiative, make

choices, and take responsibility for their activities. Third, this approach opens up space for learning differentiation, as each child can move according to their own pace and interests.

More broadly, the prepared environment concept also has implications for how educational institutions are managed. An effective environment cannot be created by chance but requires ongoing planning and reflection. This demonstrates that environmental design is part of an educational strategy that must be seriously considered. This is where the concept begins to intersect with the issue of leadership, as decisions regarding how the environment is designed are inseparable from the role of the institution's leaders.

When read critically, the Montessori concept can also be seen as a critique of educational approaches that are overly outcome-oriented. In many educational systems, success is often measured through quantitatively measurable academic achievement. Montessori offers a different perspective, where the learning process and experience are the primary focus. A well-prepared environment allows children to

experience meaningful learning, which in turn impacts more holistic development.

However, this approach also faces challenges when confronted with the demands of the broader education system. Curriculum standardization, outcome-based evaluation, and administrative pressures can limit the scope for implementing the prepared environment concept. In such situations, questions arise about the extent to which the Montessori approach can be integrated without directly confronting existing structures.

The answer to this question is not a single one. In some cases, integration can be achieved partially, for example through classroom layout or the use of more varied materials. However, such an approach risks reducing the Montessori concept to mere techniques, without addressing its philosophical foundations. A more challenging alternative is to make adjustments at a more fundamental level, including how we view the role of the teacher, the structure of learning time, and the goals of education itself.

In this discourse, it is important to maintain a balance between an appreciation of Montessori's

contributions and a critical attitude toward its limitations. Adopting the prepared environment concept without reflection can result in superficial practices. Conversely, rejecting the concept entirely also has the potential to close off opportunities to enrich existing educational approaches. What is needed is an open dialogue between diverse perspectives, allowing for a more contextual and relevant understanding.

By examining the concept of prepared environments philosophically and critically, it becomes clear that the environment plays a far more significant role than is often assumed in educational practice. It is not merely a supporter, but an integral part of the learning process itself. This awareness opens the possibility of viewing education from a different perspective, where environmental design is key to creating inclusive and meaningful learning experiences.

### **Reconstructing Early Childhood Islamic Education Leadership: From Authority to Environment Designer**

Efforts to reconstruct leadership in Early Childhood Islamic Education require a fundamental shift in

perspective, particularly in understanding the position and function of leaders within the educational ecosystem. Leadership has traditionally been positioned within a framework of authority centered on decision-making, supervision, and control (Chafa & Ncube, n.d.). This framework is not entirely incorrect, as educational institutions do require a clear structure to operate effectively. However, when this framework becomes dominant, leadership risks being reduced to an administrative practice distanced from the pedagogical dynamics occurring in the learning environment.

In the context of Early Childhood Education, this distance becomes problematic because children's learning experiences are shaped through direct interactions with the environment. If leadership does not address this dimension, its role in shaping the quality of education is limited. This is where the need arises to shift the focus of leadership from simply managing systems to designing learning experiences. This shift leads to the idea that leaders function not only as directors but also as designers of environments that

enable inclusive and meaningful learning processes.

The idea of the leader as an environmental designer finds its theoretical foundation in an understanding of Maria Montessori's thinking, particularly the concept of the prepared environment. While in Montessori's approach the environment is positioned as the primary medium for learning, within a leadership framework, the environment can be understood as the result of strategic decisions made by the leader. This means that environmental design is not simply a technical matter left to the teacher, but rather part of a broader leadership vision.

Within this framework, the leader's authority is not lost but transformed. Authority is no longer expressed through direct control over teacher and child behavior, but rather through the ability to design conditions that enable productive interactions. Leaders do not need to be present in every learning activity, but their presence is reflected in the structure of the environment they construct. The environment represents the values, vision, and leadership orientation held by the institution.

However, this shift cannot be implemented without facing a number of objections. One frequent criticism is that the concept of leaders as environmental designers tends to be abstract and difficult to implement, especially in the context of early childhood Islamic education institutions with limited resources (Wikaningtyas & Asiah, 2023). This criticism is well-founded, as environmental design is often associated with the need for adequate facilities, specialized materials, and flexible spaces. In a context where institutions are still struggling to meet basic needs, this idea can be perceived as elitist.

This criticism needs to be addressed by broadening the understanding of what is meant by the environment. The environment refers not only to physical aspects but also includes patterns of interaction, the culture of the institution, and the rhythms of activities that shape children's experiences. In this sense, environmental design does not always require large material investments. Changes in the way time is organized, how teachers interact with children, or how space is used can be part of a design strategy with significant impact.

Leaders have a crucial role in guiding these changes through the policies and practices they promote.

Another criticism relates to the potential weakening of the role of teachers. If leaders focus on environmental design, there is a concern that pedagogical responsibility will shift disproportionately, leaving teachers with less room for initiative (Sedlak, 1987). This criticism highlights the potential tension between the design established by leaders and teachers' professional autonomy. In such situations, teachers may feel constrained by predetermined structures.

In response, it is important to emphasize that environmental design within a leadership framework is not intended to rigidly control teacher practice, but rather to provide a framework that supports creativity and flexibility. Leaders do not design every detail of an activity, but rather create the conditions that enable teachers to develop responsive pedagogical practices. In this sense, the relationship between leaders and teachers is collaborative, not hierarchical. Environmental design becomes the result of a multi-

stakeholder dialogue, not the sole product of the leader's authority.

In the context of early childhood education based on Islamic values, this reconstruction also needs to consider the spiritual and ethical dimensions that are integral to education. The designed environment aims not only to support cognitive and social development but also to foster spiritual awareness and character formation (Fauzi & Usman, 2024). This requires leaders to be sensitive to the values they wish to instill, as well as the ability to translate them into forms that children can experience in their daily lives.

At this point, environmental design-based leadership can be understood as a practice that simultaneously integrates various dimensions of education. The physical design of a classroom, for example, can reflect the values of order and beauty. Patterns of interaction between teachers and children can reflect the values of compassion and respect. The rhythm of daily activities can reflect the balance between freedom and responsibility. All of these elements are interconnected and form a holistic experience for children.

However, this approach is not without challenges. One major challenge is resistance to change, especially in institutional contexts accustomed to top-down leadership styles. The shift toward more dialogic and design-based leadership requires a cultural shift that cannot occur instantly. Leaders need to build trust, create spaces for participation, and demonstrate consistency in practice. Without this process, the proposed changes risk being rejected or only superficially adopted.

Furthermore, there are epistemological challenges related to how knowledge about leadership is produced and disseminated (Fauzi & Chirzin, 2023). The literature on educational leadership is still dominated by approaches that emphasize individual competence and organizational effectiveness (Dimopoulos, 2020). Approaches that place the environment at the center of analysis are relatively limited (Toprak, 2020). This often leaves reconstruction efforts lacking strong references in mainstream literature. However, this is precisely where this approach's potential contribution lies: opening up space for new

perspectives that can enrich existing discourse.

Taking a deeper look, the reconstruction of leadership from authority to environmental design is not merely a technical or methodological issue, but also involves a shift in thinking about education itself. Education is no longer understood as a process controlled from above, but as an ecosystem shaped through the interaction of various elements. Within this ecosystem, leaders act as architects, designing the conditions for these interactions to occur productively and inclusively.

This approach also opens up the possibility of understanding inclusivity in a more concrete way. Inclusivity is not simply realized through policies or value statements, but through the design of environments that enable every child to engage and thrive. Children with different needs are not treated as exceptions to be accommodated within the system, but as part of the diversity that underpins the design of the system itself.

By understanding leadership within this framework, it becomes clear that the desired change cannot be achieved solely through training or

improving individual competencies. A more fundamental shift is needed in how institutions understand and manage the educational process. Leaders have a strategic role in driving this change, but their success depends heavily on their ability to develop a clear vision, communicate it effectively, and translate it into consistent practice.

Ultimately, this reconstruction is not intended to completely replace existing leadership models, but rather to broaden the understanding of what leadership in Early Childhood Islamic Education means. By placing the environment at the center of attention, leadership can move closer to the core of the educational process itself: the child's learning experience. It is at this point that leadership finds its most fundamental relevance, not as a symbol of authority, but as a force that shapes the conditions for the optimal growth of each child's potential.

### **Critical Reflection: Opportunities and Challenges in the Indonesian Context**

Understanding the opportunities and challenges of implementing environmental design-based leadership in the Indonesian context requires sensitivity to the social,

cultural, and institutional complexities that shape the practice of Early Childhood Islamic Education. Indonesia is characterized not only by geographic and social diversity but also by variations in the quality and orientation of early childhood education institutions. In such a landscape, any attempt to reconstruct the concept of leadership cannot be separated from the heterogeneous realities. What appears ideal at the conceptual level may not easily translate into consistent practice across local contexts.

One particularly striking opportunity lies in the alignment between the principles underlying the environment-based approach and the values of Islamic education. The notion of respecting the natural instincts of children, the importance of familiarization through direct experience, and the emphasis on balancing cognitive, affective, and spiritual aspects resonate with the approach developed by Maria Montessori. In the Islamic educational tradition, the environment has long been understood as a crucial factor in character formation. The family, social, and learning environments are

viewed as interconnected spaces in shaping a child's personality.

This alignment opens up space for a more organic integration, rather than simply adopting external concepts. The environment-based approach can be enriched with local and religious values deeply rooted in community educational practices. This presents an opportunity to develop a leadership model that is not only pedagogically relevant but also culturally legitimate. Early childhood Islamic education leaders can utilize values already recognized by the community as a foundation for driving change in educational practices, so that the transformation they seek does not feel foreign or forced.

However, this opportunity is not without challenges. One major challenge is the tendency to grasp new concepts superficially. In many cases, the adoption of educational approaches often stops at the most visible aspects, such as spatial arrangement or the use of certain teaching aids, without a deep understanding of their philosophical foundations. As a result, concepts like prepared environments risk being reduced to mere styles or methods, rather than paradigms that transform

perspectives on education and leadership.

Criticism of this tendency is quite relevant, as it suggests that the desired transformation cannot be achieved through superficial changes. In response, it is important to emphasize that conceptual understanding is a crucial prerequisite for meaningful implementation. Leaders are required not only to know what needs to be done, but also why it is important. Without this understanding, changes tend to be sporadic and unsustainable.

Another significant challenge relates to institutional structures and organizational cultures that are still strongly influenced by hierarchical patterns. In many early childhood education institutions, leadership is still understood as a position of authority to direct and control, while participation from teachers and other education personnel is relatively limited. In such a context, efforts to shift leadership toward a more dialogical and design-based approach to environmental education can face resistance, both explicit and implicit.

This resistance doesn't always manifest as open rejection, but can manifest as indifference or half-

hearted adoption. Teachers may follow directions without deep engagement. In situations like this, the desired changes struggle to achieve significant impact. Criticism of the environment-based approach often stems from experiences like this, where the concept is deemed ineffective because it doesn't produce tangible change.

Addressing these criticisms requires a more strategic approach to implementation. Change cannot be instantaneous; it requires a gradual process involving various stakeholders. Leaders need to foster dialogue that allows teachers to understand, question, and ultimately internalize the concepts introduced. This process takes time and patience, but it is a crucial investment to ensure that the changes are profound and sustainable.

In addition to cultural and organizational aspects, resource factors also pose a challenge that cannot be ignored. Many early childhood education institutions in Indonesia operate with limited facilities and funding (P. I. Sari, Rudiyanto, & Agustin, 2024). Under these conditions, the notion of environmental design is often

considered unrealistic. The ideal environment is imagined as having spacious spaces, complete materials, and modern facilities, which are difficult for institutions with limited resources to achieve.

This criticism needs to be addressed by shifting the perspective on what constitutes a supportive learning environment. The environment does not have to be synonymous with luxury or material amenities. What is more important is how the available space is optimally utilized, how interactions are organized, and how values are embodied in daily practice. Leaders have a crucial role in guiding creativity and innovation to overcome existing limitations. In many cases, small changes in the way spaces or activities are organized can have a significant impact on children's learning experiences.

On the other hand, there are also challenges related to policy and regulation. The Indonesian education system is still heavily influenced by national standards, which often emphasize administrative aspects and measurable outcomes. In this context, an environment-based approach that emphasizes the learning process and

experience may be considered less aligned with existing evaluation requirements. Early Childhood Islamic Education leaders are in a difficult position, having to navigate the interplay between external demands and the institution's internal needs.

Criticism of this system often leads to the assumption that educational innovation is difficult as long as the policy framework remains unchanged. This argument has merit, but it also risks placing the responsibility for change entirely on external factors. In reality, there is still room for leaders to innovate within existing boundaries. Creativity in interpreting policies, as well as the ability to utilize available flexibility, can be key to developing more inclusive practices.

In Indonesia's pluralistic context, another opportunity to capitalize on is the diversity of local practices that have developed across various regions. Many communities have their own ways of educating children that emphasize togetherness, independence, and respect for the environment (Saepudin & Mulyono, 2019). These practices can serve as a source of inspiration for developing contextualized environmental

designs. Early Childhood Islamic Education leaders can act as bridges between local knowledge and broader educational concepts, creating a relevant and sustainable synthesis.

However, the integration of local practices and modern concepts is not without challenges. There is a risk of romanticizing local practices without critically evaluating their effectiveness. Not all traditionally developed practices are appropriate for children's developmental needs in today's context. Therefore, a selective and reflective approach is required when adopting elements from various sources. Dialogue between tradition and innovation is crucial to ensure that the integration truly adds value (Fauzi & Hamami, 2022; Siswadi et al., 2025).

This critical reflection on the opportunities and challenges demonstrates that the implementation of environmental design-based leadership in ECCE in Indonesia cannot be viewed as a linear process. It involves negotiations between various interacting interests, values, and conditions. Leaders are required not only to understand the concept but also to be sensitive to the context and able to adapt to existing dynamics.

In this complex environment, success is not always measured by the extent to which the concept is fully implemented, but by the ability to develop relevant and meaningful practices. Leadership is an evolving process, requiring ongoing reflection and openness to learning. Environmental design-based approaches offer a promising direction, but their realization depends heavily on how the concept is translated into practices that are sensitive to Indonesia's diverse context.

#### **D. Conclusion**

The discussion in this article demonstrates that leadership in Early Childhood Islamic Education can no longer be understood narrowly as an administrative function or merely a personal capacity to manage an institution. Leadership needs to be reread as a practice that has direct implications for children's learning experiences, including how the environment is designed, organized, and interpreted. When leadership is separated from the pedagogical dimension, the inclusivity advocated often remains at the normative level

and is not fully present in the realities of everyday learning.

Through an examination of Maria Montessori's thought, particularly the concept of the prepared environment, this article asserts that the environment plays a far more significant role than previously assumed in early childhood Islamic education practice. The environment is not merely a physical setting, but an active medium that shapes children's interactions, experiences, and development. Within this framework, leadership no longer centers on direct control over individuals, but rather on the ability to design conditions that enable inclusive, adaptive, and meaningful learning.

This reconstruction of leadership from authority to environmental design opens up a new perspective in understanding the role of early childhood education leaders. Leaders are not only tasked with ensuring organizational order but also as architects of learning ecosystems that reflect the educational values they espouse. This shift implies that leadership decisions must consider how space, time, interactions, and materials contribute to shaping children's experiences. Inclusivity, in

this context, is no longer defined as a declarative policy but as a reality realized through concrete environmental design.

However, this article also demonstrates that this reconstruction effort is not without challenges. The gap between concept and practice, limited resources, a hierarchical organizational culture, and pressures from regulatory systems are factors influencing implementation in the field. These challenges demand a more reflective and contextual approach than a simplistic one. Environmental design-based leadership cannot be applied as a uniform model but needs to be adapted to diverse social, cultural, and institutional conditions, particularly in the Indonesian context.

The main contribution of this article lies in shifting the focus of early childhood Islamic education leadership studies from a structure- and function-oriented approach to one that is experience- and design-oriented. By placing the environment at the center of analysis, this article offers a conceptual framework that connects leadership, pedagogy, and inclusivity in a more integrative manner. This framework opens the possibility of understanding early

childhood Islamic education as an ecosystem formed through the interaction of various elements, where leaders play a strategic role in directing and aligning these elements.

More broadly, this approach offers both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it enriches the discourse on Islamic educational leadership by incorporating the environmental design dimension as an integral part of leadership practice. Practically, it offers direction for early childhood Islamic education administrators to develop more contextual strategies for realizing inclusivity, not only through policy but also through consciously designed learning experiences.

Finally, the leadership reconstruction offered in this article is not intended as a final formulation, but rather as an invitation to open a broader dialogue. Leadership in early childhood Islamic education is an evolving practice, requiring ongoing reflection as the educational context and needs change. By using the environment as a starting point, it is hoped that a more holistic perspective will emerge in understanding how leadership can significantly contribute to child development within an

inclusive and meaningful educational framework.

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