

The Dynamics of the Decline of Madrasah Diniyah Students: Curriculum Challenges, Family Economy, and the Influence of Digital Technology

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Abstract

This study specifically conducts a comprehensive analysis of the critical phenomenon of declining enrollment in Madrasah Diniyah schools within Islamic foundations in the Tlogosari Wetan district of Semarang City, Indonesia, from the perspective of contemporary Islamic education. Adopting a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design, data were collected through unstructured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis in Pedurungan Subdistrict, then analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model to ensure empirical validity. Key findings reveal the decline in student enrollment as a multidimensional phenomenon, driven by three dominant, mutually interacting factors: the economic priorities of urban families that prioritize formal education, a stagnant curriculum that is irrelevant to Generation Z, and the penetration of digital technology that diverts children's interests. These factors exacerbate the marginalization of madrasahs, triggering operational and humanitarian crises such as budget deficits, limited facilities, and the erosion of teachers' welfare, which significantly reduce the quality of education. Although administrators have implemented digital curriculum innovations, schedule adjustments, and strategic collaborations, these efforts are hindered by limited human and financial resources. Therefore, an urgent holistic intervention is needed that integrates financial management, teacher protection, and sustainable educational methodology transformation through government-community collaboration. The findings of this study provide an empirical basis for strategic policies that not only aim to increase the number of santri but also strengthen the operations and core values of Islamic education, adapting them to urban dynamics, in order to ensure the continued existence of these non-formal institutions in the future.

Kata Kunci:

madrasah diniyah;
penurunan santri;
pendidikan Islam

Abstrak

Penelitian ini secara khusus menganalisis secara komprehensif fenomena kritis penurunan jumlah murid Madrasah Diniyah di yayasan Islam wilayah Tlogosari Wetan, Kota Semarang, Indonesia, dari perspektif pendidikan Islam kontemporer. Mengadopsi pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain fenomenologi, data didapatkan melalui wawancara tidak terstruktur, observasi partisipatif, serta analisis dokumen di Kecamatan Pedurungan, kemudian diolah menggunakan model interaktif Miles dan Huberman untuk menjamin validitas empiris. Temuan utama mengungkap penurunan murid sebagai fenomena multidimensi, dipicu tiga faktor dominan yang saling berinteraksi: prioritas ekonomi keluarga urban

yang mengutamakan pendidikan formal, kurikulum stagnan dan kurang relevan bagi Generasi Z, serta penetrasi teknologi digital yang mengalihkan minat anak. Faktor-faktor ini memperburuk marginalisasi madrasah, memicu krisis operasional dan kemanusiaan seperti defisit anggaran, fasilitas terbatas, serta erosi kesejahteraan ustaz, yang menurunkan kualitas pendidikan secara signifikan. Meskipun pengelola menerapkan inovasi kurikulum digital, penyesuaian jadwal, dan kolaborasi strategis, upaya tersebut terhambat keterbatasan sumber daya manusia serta keuangan. Oleh karena itu, diperlukan intervensi holistik mendesak yang mengintegrasikan pengelolaan keuangan, perlindungan pengajar, dan transformasi metodologi pendidikan secara berkelanjutan melalui kolaborasi pemerintah dan masyarakat. Kontribusi penelitian ini menyediakan dasar empiris bagi kebijakan strategis, yang tidak hanya menargetkan peningkatan santri, tetapi juga memperkuat operasional dan nilai inti pendidikan Islam adaptif terhadap dinamika urban, guna mencegah eksistensi lembaga non-formal ini di masa depan.

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INTRODUCTION

Madrasah Diniyah under the Semarang Islamic Foundation should serve as a popular center for spiritual character development with an annual increase in student enrollment, through collaboration among the institution, parents, and the community (Nando & Rivauzi, 2022). However, the reality shows a significant decline, contrary to the foundation's aspirations, reflecting a crisis of priorities within society. Secular formal education is considered more prestigious and economically promising than diniyah education. Challenges include shifts in social values, family economics, modern extracurricular activities, and digital technology, which reduce time for studying classical Islamic texts and diminish motivation for nightly recitation (Muzayanah, 2020). The perception that madrasahs are irrelevant to the times exacerbates this rejection. The gap between the institution's religious goals and social pragmatism threatens the institution's existence amid globalization, which is eroding Islamic values in Semarang (Abdurrahman et al., 2021). Revitalizing the curriculum and culture is urgent to avoid marginalization and restore the institution's reputation in the educational competition.

The decline in the number of students at Madrasah Diniyah in Semarang has drawn the attention of scholars in Islamic education. Five recent studies: (Amalia et al., 2022) found that family economic pressures are the dominant factor; (Ashari et al., 2023) highlighted a lack of curriculum innovation; (Shopia & Ferianto, 2024) identified digital distractions; (Nurdin, 2019) emphasizes conventional teacher competencies, (Fauzi & Nikmatullah, 2016) discusses parents' views on the relevance of Diniyah certificates in the workforce. Overall, modern external factors and internal institutional factors are the primary causes. However, a significant gap remains: the studies are partial, micro-level, descriptive-qualitative in nature, lacking comprehensive solutions or a collaborative ecosystem model involving foundations, the government, and the digital community specific to urban Semarang. Temporary solutions are insufficiently systematic in terms of public policy or technological adaptation. New research based on strategic partnerships is needed for revitalization, providing concrete guidance to save diniyah from the complexities of modernity in Semarang.

This study provides an in-depth examination of the decline in the number of students at Madrasah Diniyah Islam Semarang within the context of contemporary Islamic education. Its primary objective is to identify the main contributing factors, assess the impact on institutional operations, the well-being of teachers, and socioeconomic conditions, and formulate responsive strategies for administrators to ensure the institution's sustainability amid the student enrollment crisis. This is particularly significant in Pedurungan District, Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia, which illustrates an urban social shift regarding non-formal religious traditions in the face of urban modernity a region with a high Muslim population but declining interest in diniyah education (Khunaifi, 2024). This location is ideal for a case study of urban socio-cultural dynamics. Without specific analysis, these unique patterns cannot be understood. The results of this study are expected to provide a solid empirical foundation for sustainable strategic decision-making to save the institution from bankruptcy, protect the ustaz's livelihood, preserve Islamic values against the erosion of local Central Javanese identity caused by globalization, and prevent a ripple effect on other madrasahs in Semarang.

The importance of this research lies in the threat to the sustainability of Madrasah Diniyah Semarang as a Muslim moral institution. The decline in the number of students is not merely a statistic, but a sign of a crisis that jeopardizes the livelihoods of teachers who depend on teaching and reduces the quality of education due to the loss of skilled teachers (Hanafiah, 2020). Modernization in Semarang is filling the religious void with secular/pragmatic values, which are at odds with the religious community. Research provides accurate data for effective intervention policies, not mere assumptions. Delaying action risks the loss of an Islamic generation during a critical growth phase (Wati & Ridwan, 2024). A comprehensive analysis is urgently needed to save religious education from structural collapse and prevent social tensions in Pedurungan before they reach a critical point. Without swift and precise research, revitalization efforts will be too late or fail to address urban challenges, thereby jeopardizing the sustainability of Islamic education and the socio-religious stability of Central Java before the impacts become permanent. Contributions are made by formulating appropriate steps such as promotions on social media to maintain and improve the sustainability of Islamic education amidst changes in urban life.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to understand the deeper meaning of the phenomenon of declining student enrollment at Madrasah Diniyah. This design was chosen because it provides direct insight into the lived experiences of the parties involved, rather than merely numerical data (Donalek, 2004). Data collection employed triangulation: in-depth interviews to capture subjective perspectives, participant observation within the Madrasah Diniyah environment in Pedurungan Subdistrict to observe teacher-student interactions and the learning atmosphere, and document analysis such as annual registration data and the foundation's financial reports (Khan, 2014). This approach allows for the exploration of unexpected themes within the socio-cultural context of Semarang, with the researcher serving as the primary instrument attuned to emotional, non-verbal, and external factors. This combination of methods builds robust data to comprehensively uncover the social

dynamics of the decline in student numbers, linking educational phenomena to the broader human context.

The interviews were conducted rigorously with eight informants: four ustadz (via WhatsApp chat and Instagram DMs) and four santri (45-minute face-to-face sessions) to gather in-depth data. Given the context of Semarang, the interviews were conducted in Javanese to foster a sense of familiarity and natural expression. Audio data was digitally recorded, transcribed into Indonesian with the informants' consent, and then translated into English for international publication (Koopmans & Statham, 2010). Ethical standards were upheld through the anonymization of identities (names replaced with initials), the confidentiality of sensitive data such as economic conditions or institutional criticism, and obtaining consent prior to recording. The translation process carefully preserves the cultural and emotional nuances of the Javanese language. Field notes documented non-verbal expressions. This protocol ensures data integrity from the field to publication, guaranteeing that the voices of the Pedurungan community are clearly heard in global discourse without compromising privacy.

Table 1. Informant Profile

No	Initials	Gender	Where the institution/temple resides	Age
1	R	Male	Bugen, Semarang	48
2	L	Male	Bangetayu Kulon, Semarang	30
3	F	Male	Banjawdowo, Semarang	48
4	M	Male	Bugen, Semarang	28
5	E	Women	Gayamsari, Semarang	20
6	H	Women	Sayung, Demak	20
7	N	Women	Sayung, Demak	19
8	D	Women	Kadilangu, Demak	22

Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources and methods, comparing the results of interviews with teachers and students with direct observations and official madrasah documents (Taherdoost, 2021). Discrepancies in information were reconfirmed until clarified. Analysis employs the Miles and Huberman interactive model with three simultaneous steps (Miles et al., 2014): data reduction, selecting relevant information regarding factors contributing to student attrition while discarding unnecessary details, data presentation in matrices or networks to visualize variable relationships, drawing conclusions and verification, systematically interpreting patterns. This model was applied iteratively throughout the process, with constant interaction with the data to clarify codes/themes. This framework ensures conclusions are grounded in empirical evidence from Semarang, maintaining methodological rigor, logical consistency, and a clear audit trail. This implementation is crucial for developing strategic recommendations for madrasah administrators, avoiding descriptive narratives lacking strong contextual generalizations.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

Factors that are the main cause of the decline in the number of students of Madrasah Diniyah in Pedurungan District, Semarang City

The findings of this study show that in this sub-district there are 3 dominant factors that cause the decline in Madrasah Diniyah students that are systemically and complexly

interrelated. First, the shift in the economic priorities of urban families forces parents to prioritize formal education for the sake of future career security, so that the time for non-formal religious education is significantly eliminated due to the crowded academic schedule of public schools. Second, the curriculum and learning methods that are considered stagnant and less adaptive to the dynamics of generation Z make students feel bored and consider the material presented irrelevant to their daily lives in the fast-paced modern era. Third, the massive penetration of digital technology has drastically changed children's lifestyles, where gadgets and social media are the main distractions that erode interest and concentration on afternoon religious activities that require extra perseverance. These findings show that the decline in the number of students is not only a matter of the loss of spiritual interest, but also the impact of the rapidly changing socio-economic structure in the increasingly industrial northern coastal area of Semarang. In Pedurungan, the pressure of living in big cities makes madrassas often considered as an additional burden than the basic needs of forming children's moral character. The combination of these three factors creates structural barriers that are difficult to break without targeted policy interventions from foundation managers to innovate. Parents feel they don't have free time, children feel disinterested because of rigid methods, and the social environment favors digital distractions over traditional values. As a result, the existence of madrassas is threatened with marginalization in the midst of the Muslim community which is actually densely populated. This study emphasizes that internal institutional and external factors of society are closely related in determining the sustainability of early childhood education in the midst of globalization.

The phenomenon of declining students in Pedurungan is strongly triggered by the shift in economic priorities of urban families that force parents to prioritize formal education for career security. H stated, "I have to choose a public school so that I can work later." This condition is exacerbated by the pressure of living in a big city that is increasingly competitive, as E adds, "The cost of living in Semarang is getting higher and the needs of the family are divided because I have two younger brothers who are still in school, so priorities have changed." As a result, the time for religious education is significantly excluded, N admitted, "The time spent by friends is spent on academic tutoring, not recitation." Madrasah diniyah is often considered an additional burden in the midst of a squeeze, E explained, "Madrasah is considered an additional burden in the midst of economic squeeze." From the institutional side, M observed, "Many parents say that economic conditions are uncertain." This confirms R, "Basic needs are more important than non-formal religion." This data shows that the rational decisions of the students are driven by future economic guarantees rather than spiritual values alone, creating structural obstacles to the sustainability of madrassas in the increasingly dense northern coastal industrial area of Semarang but lack support for non-formal education.



Figure 1. interview with the source

Internal factors in the form of stagnant curriculum and learning methods also contribute significantly to the dynamic disinterest of Generation Z. M complained, "Our teaching methods are still conventional and lack variety." The material taught is often considered outdated by students, L agreed, "The material of the yellow book is less relevant for today's children." The limitation of adaptation is a major obstacle for teachers, F admitted, "We have difficulty adapting the material to the fast times." The monotonous learning process is also a serious problem, R added, "The one-way lecture method makes students sleep." The students' response to this method was clear, N reported, "I feel that the lessons at the madrasah make me sleepy." D continued, "We prefer to learn that there is direct practice." These findings indicate that without pedagogical revitalization that is relevant to the dynamics of modern life, madrassas will continue to be abandoned because they fail to provide educational added value that is directly felt by students in their daily lives in the fast-paced era.

The massive penetration of digital technology has drastically changed children's lifestyles and has become a major distraction for nighttime religious activities that require perseverance. E said, "My friend prefers to play online games than study." Uncontrolled access to gadgets is a big obstacle, H admitted, "Gadgets become the main distraction when night falls." In the classroom, the focus of the students was clearly divided, R saw, "Students often bring cellphones and do not focus on studying." Digital content is much more appealing to them, L observes, "Social media is more appealing to them than books." The impact on study concentration is very real, F is sad, "Their concentration is broken because of app notifications." The students also felt overwhelmed to control themselves and their friends, D added, "It's very difficult to grab the attention of friends from the screen." This phenomenon confirms that the digital social environment favors distraction rather than traditional values, so madrassas must compete fiercely with instant entertainment that offers instant gratification to the younger generation in the urban area of Semarang.

The implications of the decline in the number of students trigger an operational and humanitarian crisis that seriously and sustainably threatens the welfare of teachers. L said, "Our honor has dropped drastically because the number of students is small." This condition forces teachers to look for other income alternatives. R was concerned, "Many of my teacher friends have moved to look for side jobs." The impact on the quality of teaching is inevitable, F admits, "The quality of teaching has dropped because we are tired of making a living." The institution's infrastructure was abandoned due to the deficit, R added, "The facilities were damaged but there was no funds for repairs." The students also noticed this physical change, N saw, "The madrasah building looks increasingly unmaintained, a lot of garbage is scattered." The stability of teachers is also significantly disturbed, H commented, "Teachers sometimes don't leave so it makes us a little upset." This cycle of degradation is self-reinforcing, where limited resources and declining teacher morale have an impact on the decline in the quality of educational services which further strengthens the negative perception of the public towards non-formal religious educational institutions.

To respond to these critical conditions, managers have implemented strategies but still require systemic integration and strong external partnerships. He suggested, "We need to build cooperation between madrasahs, parents of students, and the community in supporting early education with direct promotion and through social media." Support from the community is the main hope of the manager, D hopes, "There is an incentive so that

friends want to go to school here again." Innovation of learning methods is starting to be attempted, L planned, "We try to use learning videos to make it more interesting." Time flexibility is also offered to accommodate busy schedules, N supports, "If the schedule is flexible, parents may agree." Collaboration between institutions is the key to the solution, the target is, "Collaboration with formal schools must be built immediately." The sustainability of the institution needs a radical new solution, E asked, "Don't rely only on student contributions in the future." These findings confirm that the rescue of Madrasah Diniyah requires a holistic intervention that integrates aspects of financial governance, social protection for teaching staff, and sustainable transformation of educational methods without a multi-stakeholder collaborative approach involving local communities and communities.

Implications of the Decrease in the Number of Students on the Operational Sustainability and Welfare of Teaching Staff (Ustaz) in Madrasah Diniyah

The findings of the study reveal three critical implications of the decrease in the number of students on the operational sustainability and welfare of teaching staff (ustaz) at Madrasah Diniyah, Pedurungan District. First, institutional financial pressure is the most direct impact, where the reduction of student contributions causes an operational budget deficit that forces managers to cut allocations for facility maintenance, purchase of teaching materials, and institutional development programs, so that madrasah infrastructure is increasingly lagging behind and less attractive for prospective new students. Second, the welfare of ustaz is significantly eroded because the honorarium system based on the number of students makes their income uncertain and tends to decrease drastically, forcing many teachers to look for side jobs which ultimately reduces focus, energy, and quality of learning in the classroom, and triggers an exodus of competent teachers to other institutions that are more economically promising. Third, there is a cycle of degradation of education quality that is self-reinforcing; Limited resources and declining teacher morale have an impact on the decline in the quality of educational services, which then further strengthens the negative perception of the public and exacerbates the trend of declining interest in new student registration. This implication creates an alarming dynamic where madrassas are trapped in a negative spiral that is difficult to break without external intervention. In Pedurungan, this condition is exacerbated by the lack of alternative funding support from the parent foundation which also faces limited resources. As a result, the sustainability of madrassas is not only threatened in terms of the quantity of students, but also from the fragility of the operational and humanitarian foundations of its educators. This finding confirms that the decline in students is not just a quantitative issue, but a multidimensional crisis that requires holistic solutions regarding financial governance, social protection of ustaz, and strategies for revitalizing educational services so that madrasah diniyah is still able to carry out its strategic function as a moral fortress of the young generation in the midst of the modernization of Semarang City which is increasingly competitive and challenging for community-based non-formal educational institutions.

Institutional financial pressure is the most direct impact of the decline in the number of students which significantly erodes the operational stability of madrassas. M revealed, "The student dues have decreased, the operational income of the madrasah has also decreased." This condition forced the managers to carry out strict efficiency, R added, "We had to cut a lot of development programs because there was no reserve fund." The

budget deficit has become a chronic problem, F admits, "The budget deficit has become a daily meal in this institution." Without an adequate student base, madrasah operations are difficult to run normally, L is concerned, "Without enough students, madrasahs cannot operate as they should." From the perspective of the students, E explained, "I know that madrasahs need funds, but the family's economic conditions are also getting more difficult." This was reinforced by N, "Many parents think twice about paying madrasah dues in the midst of a squeeze." This data confirms that macroeconomic pressures have a direct impact on the micro-financial of institutions, creating structural vulnerabilities that threaten the sustainability of madrasahs in urban areas.

The impact of the budget deficit is evident in the deterioration of infrastructure and the limitations of learning materials that are increasingly lagging behind. L complained, "The building is old but there is no money for repairs." Limited funds also hinder the renewal of learning resources, M added, "Lack of updates to teaching materials, inadequate learning spaces and lack of learning aids." Learning facilities are increasingly uncompetitive, R admitted, "Learning facilities are increasingly lagging behind public formal schools." The students observed this physical condition, D said, "I feel that the madrasah building is getting dull and not maintained regularly." The students also began to compare, N said, "I also felt that the class was not comfortable." The manager is aware of this limitation, F is sad, "We want to fix everything but the funds are never enough for urgent needs." These findings show that infrastructure degradation is not only an aesthetic problem, but a factor that strengthens negative perceptions of the public and exacerbates the trend of declining interest in registering new students in Pedurungan.



Figure 2. Interview with Resource Persons

The welfare of ustaz is significantly eroded due to the honorarium system based on the number of students which makes income uncertain and tends to decrease drastically. L revealed, "My honor is only enough to meet the family's monthly needs." This condition forced many teachers to look for alternative sources of income, M shared, "I have to become an online motorcycle taxi in the afternoon to increase my income." The exodus of competent personnel began to occur, R was concerned, "Many young teachers moved to other institutions because of uncertain salaries." The students witnessed this social impact, H empathized, "It's a pity to see that ustaz has to work in two places to support his family." D observed, "Good and qualified teachers one by one begin to lose their passion for teaching." M emphasized, "The welfare of teachers is the main key to the quality of sustainable children's education." This finding confirms that the welfare crisis of the ustaz is not only an internal issue, but a critical factor that determines the attractiveness and sustainability of the diniyah madrasah in the midst of competition from modern educational institutions.

The cycle of degradation of education quality is self-reinforcing, where limited resources and declining teacher morale have an impact on the decline in service quality which further strengthens the negative perception of the public. R admits, "We teach with a tired condition because our minds are divided to make an extra living." The impact on the learning process is very real, L added, "The quality of learning has decreased because teachers cannot fully focus on the students." The students felt this change in atmosphere, F observed, "The students felt the change in the spirit and energy of teaching from the ustaz." The students caught a signal of a decline in quality, E reported, "I feel that the way of teaching ustaz now feels less enthusiastic and interactive." D observed this trend, "Madrasah that used to be of good quality now feels different in service standards." The impact of reputation is starting to be seen, N admits, "Other parents are starting to hesitate to sign up because they see the change in quality that has occurred." These findings confirm that the decline in quality is not an isolated event, but rather a cumulative process that accelerates the marginalization of madrassas in an increasingly competitive urban education ecosystem.

This negative spiral dynamic creates an alarming condition where madrassas are trapped in structural barriers that are difficult to break without strategic and measurable external intervention. F described, "The fewer students, the more difficult it is for us to maintain adequate service quality." The complexity of this problem was felt by the manager, L said, "It's like a vicious circle that is difficult for us to decide on our own without help." Systemic support from outside is needed, M hopes, "We need external help, either the government or foundations, to break this negative cycle." Parents realize the urgency of rescue, H reflects, "If the madrasah closes, who will teach religious values to the current generation and future children?" E urged, "There must be concrete solutions from policymakers to overcome this crisis." R concluded, "Without collaborative intervention, madrassas have the potential to become functionally extinct in big cities." These findings confirm that the rescue of madrasahs requires a holistic approach that combines financial governance, social protection of ustaz, and revitalization of educational services through a multi-stakeholder strategic partnership in Pedurungan, Semarang.

The Strategies and Efforts Made by the Management of Madrasah Diniyah in Responding to the Decline in the Number of Students and Maintaining the Existence of Educational Institutions

This study identifies three main strategies implemented by the management of Madrasah Diniyah in Pedurungan to respond to the decline in students and maintain the existence of the institution in a sustainable manner. First, curriculum innovation and learning methods are the top priority, where managers begin to integrate digital media and fun approaches in religious materials to be relevant to the interests of generation Z who are familiar with technology, thereby reducing the impression of rigidity and boring for young students. Second, time management flexibility is strictly implemented by offering class schedules that are more adaptive to the busy lives of children in formal schools, including weekend or evening class options, to accommodate the limited time of parents and students in the midst of Semarang's demanding urban activities. Third, the development of strategic partnerships is carried out through active collaboration with external parties such as local communities or private donors to secure operational funding and provide scholarships for underprivileged students, thereby reducing the economic burden on families as the main

obstacle to enrollment. However, field findings show that these efforts are still partial and have not been optimally integrated due to limited human resources and available funds. Managers are fully aware that without systemic transformation, this strategy will only be a fragile short-term solution. Therefore, a strong commitment is needed to continue to adapt without abandoning the core values of Islamic education that are the foundation. These three efforts became the last bastion of madrasah defense in the midst of the onslaught of modernity. If managed properly, this strategy has the potential to reverse negative trends and restore public trust in the vital role of madrasah diniyah in shaping children's character in the Pedurungan area, Semarang City, while ensuring the sustainability of non-formal religious education institutions in a future that is increasingly competitive and challenging for all parties.

The implementation of curriculum innovations and learning methods is the top priority of managers to attract the interest of generation Z who are familiar with technology. L stated, "We started using learning videos so that students would not get bored when receiving material." This change was positively welcomed by the students, as H reported, "I prefer to have pictures or videos during learning." The conventional approach was gradually abandoned, R explained, "The lecture method alone is no longer suitable for the critical current generation." The impact can be seen on the motivation to learn, D added, "The fun approach will make us and our friends enthusiastic to come to the madrasah." Technology integration is a strategic focus, M confirmed, "Digital media integration is our top priority this year." The relevance of the material is also increasing, E observes, "Religious material becomes more relevant to our daily lives." This effort shows the institution's awareness that reducing the impression of rigidity and boredom is a crucial first step to stop the downward trend of students in the increasingly competitive Pedurungan urban area.

Time management flexibility is strictly implemented to accommodate the busy lives of children in increasingly crowded formal schools. L revealed, "We offer weekend class options for busy weekdays." This policy is very helpful for parents, N shares, "A schedule that is not too late makes friends not sleepy." Schedule adaptation is key to retention, F emphasized, "Time management flexibility is strictly implemented now." The needs of the students were met, D said, "Friends need time to be adaptive to their formal activities." Without this flexibility, the risk of losing students increases, R warned, "If the schedule is rigid, students will definitely stay in general classes." The balance was achieved, H was satisfied, "Finally, friends can still participate in the recitation without disturbing schoolwork." This strategy responds to the pressure of Semarang's demanding urban activities, allowing madrassas to continue to exist in the midst of an increasingly complex family life schedule and limited free time.

The development of strategic partnerships is carried out through active collaboration with external parties to secure funding for the institution's operations. R informed, "We are actively building collaborations with external parties at this time." The economic impact was immediately felt, E said, "Scholarships for outstanding students greatly ease the burden on families." External support is urgently needed, M hoped, "We also need community support to promote madrassas so that the number of students increases." The role of the community is expected to be maximized, D urged, "Local community assistance is expected to be realized soon." Barriers to existence can be overcome, L believes, "Strategic partnerships are the key to reducing the barriers to

hesitation in enrollment." Access to education is open, H asked, "Education fees should not be the reason for friends to stop studying." This step seeks to increase the existence of madrasah institutions as the main obstacle, although its implementation still requires consistency and transparency so that public trust is solidly rebuilt.

However, field findings show that these efforts are still partial and have not been optimally integrated due to resource limitations. R admits, "This effort is still partial because of the limited funds available." Parents observe this condition, D said, "I see that changes exist but they have not been optimally integrated." HR constraints are an obstacle, F complained, "The limitation of human resources is our main obstacle." Sustainability is questionable, H worries, "Without systemic transformation, this solution is only short-term." The fragility of the strategy is visible, M realizes, "We are aware that this strategy is still fragile without full support." Hope for management, N is optimistic, "The big hope is in better resource management." These limitations indicate that existing innovations are not yet strong enough to break the cycle of decline independently without more systemic and structured external assistance for institutions.

Therefore, a strong commitment is needed to continue to adapt without abandoning the core values of Islamic education which is the main foundation. L emphasized, "It takes a strong commitment to continue adapting without abandoning core values." The position of this strategy is crucial, E understands, "This strategy is the last stronghold of the madrasah." The potential for recovery exists, F believes, "If managed well, it has the potential to reverse the negative trend significantly." Trust must be built, H asked, "Public trust in the vital role of madrasahs must return." The future is at stake, R is serious, "The sustainability of non-formal religious education institutions is at stake." The challenges ahead are big, D concluded, "The future is increasingly competitive and challenging for all parties." These three efforts are the last bastion of madrasahs in the midst of the onslaught of modernity, demanding the synergy of all stakeholders to ensure the sustainability of non-formal religious education institutions in a future that is increasingly competitive and challenging for all parties in Pedurungan.

Discussion

The most important finding of this study reveals that the decline in Madrasah Diniyah students in Pedurungan District, Semarang City, is a multidimensional phenomenon caused by three interrelated dominant factors: a shift in the economic priorities of urban families that prioritize formal education, a stagnant and less relevant curriculum for generation Z, and the massive penetration of digital technology that diverts children's interest from religious activities. These three factors create a vicious circle that exacerbates the marginalization of madrasahs in the midst of a crowded Muslim community. The implications of this decline are not only quantitative, but also trigger operational and humanitarian crises: budget deficits limit the maintenance of facilities, the welfare of ustaz is eroded due to the erratic number of honorarium systems, and there is a cycle of degradation of education quality that further strengthens negative perceptions of the public. To respond to this critical condition, the manager has implemented three main strategies, namely digital media-based curriculum innovation, flexibility of learning schedules, and the development of strategic partnerships with external parties. However, field findings show that these efforts are still partial and have not been systemically integrated due to limited resources. Therefore, this study emphasizes that the rescue of

Madrasah Diniyah requires a holistic intervention that combines aspects of financial governance, social protection for teaching staff, and sustainable transformation of educational methods. Without a collaborative approach involving foundations, governments, and communities, the existence of madrassas as moral fortresses of the young generation in Semarang is in danger of extinction. These findings provide a crucial empirical foundation for strategic policymaking that not only focuses on increasing the quantity of students, but also on strengthening the operational foundations and core values of Islamic education that are adaptive to contemporary urban social dynamics in the Pedurungan area and its surroundings.

The theoretical significance of the findings of this study can be analyzed through the lens of *Rational Choice Theory* which was put forward by James Coleman, who viewed social action as the result of the rational calculation of individuals in maximizing utility based on the resources they have (Coleman & Farraro, 1992). This theory has three main indicators, namely cost-benefit analysis, utility maximization, and resource allocation based on yield perception. The findings of the study show a strong direct relationship between these indicators and the phenomenon of declining students of Madrasah Diniyah in Pedurungan. First, the cost-benefit analysis indicator is clearly reflected in the shift in priorities of urban families who rationally choose to allocate limited time and funds to formal education that is perceived as promising future economic guarantees, while non-formal religious education is perceived to have *return on investment* that is less measurable in material terms (Raya, 2016). Second, the indicator of maximization of utility can be seen in the behavior of generation Z who prefer to spend their free time on digital entertainment that provides instant satisfaction, rather than participating in madrasah learning that is considered conventional and less relevant to the dynamics of their modern life (Mujahid & Sayidah, 2025). Third, the indicator of resource allocation based on the perception of returns explains why competent ustaz tend to leave madrassas for the sake of institutions with better compensation, which then triggers a cycle of degradation of the quality of educational services (Tanal dkk., 2024). Thus, *Rational Choice Theory* It provides a strong explanatory framework that the decline in students is not just a phenomenon of spiritual lethargy, but the aggregate result of thousands of micro-rational decisions of social actors who respond to changes in the incentive structure in urban society. The theoretical implication emphasizes that the revitalization of madrassas requires re-engineering of the value structure and incentives so that the rational perception of the public about the benefits of early education can change fundamentally and sustainably.

The findings of this study substantively support and expand on some relevant previous studies, namely the (Amalia dkk., 2022) about the economic pressures of the family, (Ashari dkk., 2023) related to curriculum stagnation, (Shopia & Ferianto, 2024) Regarding digital distractions, (Nurdin, 2019) Teacher Competence Questions, and (Fauzi & Nikmatullah, 2016) about parental perception. This study confirms the validity of their findings that external and internal factors contribute to the decline in student interest, but offers significant differences in terms of analytical approach. While previous studies tended to be partial and descriptive at the micro level (Fauzi & Nikmatullah, 2016), this study reveals how the three dominant factors such as shifting economic priorities, non-adaptive curriculum, and technology penetration. Interacting systemically creates a vicious circle that accelerates the marginalization of madrassas. In addition, this finding is different by emphasizing multidimensional implications that are not only quantitative, but also touch on

the humanitarian aspect in the form of the welfare of ustaz as a critical variable that is often overlooked in previous literature. While the identified response strategies have similarities with the recommendations of Fauzi and Nikmatullah (2016), this study criticizes that the implementation is still patchy without adequate ecosystem integration. The novelty of this research lies in the disclosure of the specific dynamics of coastal urban Muslim communities in Pedurungan, Semarang, which shows that the rational decisions of social actors in allocating educational resources are influenced by unique local incentive structures. Thus, this study fills the theoretical and empirical gap by offering a holistic analysis model that links family micro-decisions with the institutional sustainability of madrasas, providing a new foundation for the development of non-formal Islamic education policies that are adaptive to the socioeconomic complexity of contemporary urban societies in Indonesia.

Based on the novelty of this research, immediate strategic steps are needed that are integrative. From the policy aspect of the Semarang City government, affirmative regulations are needed that provide fiscal incentives for innovative foundations, as well as the recognition of credit for Madrasah Diniyah learning hours that can be integrated with the local content of formal schools to increase the exchange value in the eyes of parents. The government also needs to facilitate digital literacy training for teachers and provide performance-based operational grants to reduce dependence on student dues alone (Elsyam & Haj, 2024). In the internal context of the foundation, managers must immediately transform the governance of the institution by adopting a sustainable social business model, where the welfare of the ustaz is the main performance indicator to break the cycle of degradation of the quality of education. The curriculum should be revitalized with an andragogic approach that is relevant to Generation Z, integrate interactive multimedia content, and offer schedule flexibility through modular systems or blended learning (Septiani & Rejekiingsih, 2020). In addition, foundations need to build strategic partnerships with the private sector and local communities to create a strong ecosystem of supporters. The synergy between responsive public policy and foundational managerial innovation is the key to changing the local incentive structure that has been influencing rational family decisions. Without coordinated interventions that address the root of these socio-economic problems, revitalization efforts will be cosmetic. Therefore, this study recommends the establishment of a multi-stakeholder collaboration forum at the sub-district level as a forum for policy formulation based on empirical data, so that Madrasah Diniyah can dynamically adapt to the complexity of contemporary urban society without losing its Islamic identity which is the moral foundation of the young generation in Semarang.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the decline in the number of students at Madrasah Diniyah Pedurungan in Semarang indicates a crisis in non-formal Islamic education. Three main factors are at play: the economic priorities of urban families, a curriculum that is not sufficiently adapted to Generation Z, and the influx of digital technology, which creates a negative cycle that accelerates the decline in densely Muslim communities. The consequences include budget shortages, declining teacher welfare, deteriorating learning quality, and negative public perception. Administrators are innovating through digital

learning, flexible schedules, and community partnerships. A paradox of this study is the drastic decline in predominantly Muslim areas and religious loyalty that lacks institutional support. Unwittingly, families who opt solely for formal education may gradually undermine the moral values they hope to instill. The findings of this study challenge the common assumption that the revitalization of madrasahs can be achieved solely through classical da'wah approaches. Instead, a restructuring of social and economic incentive structures is necessary to make diniyah education a more rational and beneficial choice. Without systemic changes involving collaboration between the government, foundations, and the community, the Madrasah Diniyah in Pedurungan risks facing functional extinction within the next decade. This highlights an ironic situation in which an institution that is supposed to uphold values is disappearing due to its inability to adapt to the rapid pace of change.

The main limitations of this study include its geographical confinement to Pedurungan, Semarang; the difficulty in generalizing findings to different socio-cultural and economic areas; and the failure to account for suburban and rural dynamics. The limited number of informants (8 people), the qualitative method with a short timeframe, and the failure to capture long-term trends also contribute to these limitations. To address these weaknesses, future researchers are advised to conduct comparative studies across regions, comparing the dynamics of Madrasah Diniyah in several subdistricts in Semarang or even across cities in Central Java to map general and local patterns more comprehensively. A mixed-methods approach with a larger quantitative sample size is also recommended to statistically test the external validity of these qualitative findings. Additionally, a longitudinal research design is necessary to monitor the development of factors contributing to the decline in student numbers and the effectiveness of intervention strategies over time. Involving perspectives from various stakeholders, such as parents of students, community leaders, and officials from the education department, will add depth to a comprehensive analysis of the educational ecosystem. Repeating the same study protocol in other regions will provide stronger evidence for adaptive, inclusive, and empirically grounded national policies regarding non-formal Islamic education.

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