

## **Negotiating authority and innovation: project-based learning and the changing professional landscape of madrasah teachers**

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**Abstract:** Contemporary educational reforms increasingly emphasize student-centered pedagogies that transform traditional conceptions of teacher authority. Within Islamic education, however, such transformations raise important questions about how pedagogical innovation interacts with established moral and religious conceptions of teacher professionalism. This study examines how madrasah teachers negotiate professional authority while implementing project-based learning and how these negotiations reshape their professional identity within evolving educational contexts. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with twenty-five madrasah teachers who had experience implementing project-based learning in classroom practice. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns in teachers' interpretations of authority, pedagogical practice, and professional identity. The findings indicate that teachers increasingly reinterpret professional authority as dialogical pedagogical leadership characterized by facilitation, inquiry, and collaborative learning rather than hierarchical knowledge transmission. At the same time, teachers continue to ground their professional identity in Islamic educational traditions that emphasize moral guidance and ethical responsibility. These negotiations lead to the emergence of hybrid pedagogical practices that integrate project-based learning with Islamic moral pedagogy. The study contributes theoretically by proposing a culturally grounded framework of teacher professionalism in Islamic education that reconciles pedagogical innovation with religious educational values. The findings highlight the importance of developing context-sensitive pedagogical reforms that strengthen both educational innovation and the ethical foundations of madrasah teaching.

**Keywords:** Teacher professionalism, project-based learning, madrasah education, Islamic pedagogy, teacher authority.

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### **Introduction**

Educational transformation in the twenty-first century has intensified scholarly debates about the evolving nature of teacher professionalism, particularly in relation to pedagogical innovation and the reconfiguration of teacher authority in contemporary classrooms (Biesta, 2022; Sachs, 2023; Hordern, 2022). Recent educational reforms across global contexts emphasize the need for teachers to move beyond traditional transmissive pedagogies toward more student-centered approaches that foster inquiry, collaboration, and problem-solving skills (Guo et al., 2022; Kokotsaki et al., 2023; Chen & Yang, 2024). Among these pedagogical innovations, Project-Based Learning (PBL) has gained significant attention as an instructional model that encourages authentic learning experiences and promotes deeper conceptual understanding among students

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(Condliffe, 2022; Thomas, 2023; Krajcik & Shin, 2021). However, the adoption of such innovative pedagogies also raises critical questions regarding how teachers negotiate their professional authority while facilitating learner autonomy and collaborative inquiry (Kelchtermans, 2022; Priestley et al., 2023; Tambak et al., 2022; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2023). Scholars increasingly argue that teacher professionalism today involves navigating tensions between institutional expectations, pedagogical innovation, and culturally embedded forms of authority within educational institutions (Sachs, 2023; Hordern, 2022; Mouta et al., 2024). Consequently, examining how teachers negotiate authority and innovation in educational practice has become an urgent research agenda within contemporary educational scholarship (Biesta, 2022; Kelchtermans, 2022; Priestley et al., 2023).

Recent studies on teacher professionalism increasingly emphasize the importance of teacher agency and professional identity in shaping educational innovation and pedagogical change (Kelchtermans, 2022; Sachs, 2023; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2023). Contemporary scholarship suggests that teachers are not merely implementers of educational policies but active agents who interpret, negotiate, and adapt pedagogical practices within complex institutional environments (Priestley et al., 2023; Hordern, 2022; Mouta et al., 2024). Within this perspective, teacher authority is increasingly understood as relational and dialogical rather than hierarchical, reflecting a shift toward more collaborative forms of classroom interaction (Biesta, 2022; Sachs, 2023; Kelchtermans, 2022). This reconceptualization of teacher authority has been particularly influenced by emerging research on student-centered pedagogies that prioritize inquiry-based learning and participatory classroom cultures (Guo et al., 2022; Chen & Yang, 2024; Kokotsaki et al., 2023). As a result, scholars have begun to explore how innovative pedagogical models reshape the professional roles and identities of teachers within contemporary educational systems (Priestley et al., 2023; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2023; Sachs, 2023).

Project-Based Learning has emerged as one of the most influential pedagogical approaches in discussions about innovative teaching practices and student-centered learning environments (Guo et al., 2022; Kokotsaki et al., 2023; Chen & Yang, 2024). Research shows that PBL promotes active learning, collaborative inquiry, and authentic problem-solving, thereby encouraging students to engage with knowledge in more meaningful and contextualized ways (Condliffe, 2022; Thomas, 2023; Krajcik & Shin, 2021). At the same time, implementing PBL requires teachers to adopt new pedagogical roles as facilitators, mentors, and learning designers who guide students through complex learning processes (Guo et al., 2022; Chen & Yang, 2024; Kokotsaki et al., 2023). This transformation often challenges traditional notions of teacher authority because students are given greater responsibility for directing their own learning experiences (Biesta, 2022; Priestley et al., 2023; Kelchtermans, 2022). Consequently, researchers increasingly investigate how teachers manage the balance between maintaining instructional authority and fostering learner autonomy in project-based learning environments (Mouta et al., 2024; Sachs, 2023; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2023).

In addition to pedagogical innovation, recent educational research highlights the importance of contextual factors in shaping how teachers interpret and implement new teaching approaches (Hordern, 2022; Mouta et al., 2024; Tambak & Sukenti, 2024; Priestley et al., 2023). Scholars argue that teacher professionalism is deeply embedded within cultural, institutional, and historical contexts that influence teachers' beliefs, identities, and professional practices (Kelchtermans, 2022; Sachs, 2023; Biesta, 2022). Consequently, pedagogical innovations such as PBL cannot be understood solely as technical instructional models but must be examined in relation to the sociocultural contexts in which teachers operate (Guo et al., 2022; Kokotsaki et al., 2023; Chen & Yang, 2024). This perspective highlights the importance of investigating how teachers interpret and adapt innovative pedagogies within specific educational traditions and institutional cultures (Priestley et al., 2023; Hordern, 2022; Mouta et al., 2024). Such contextualized analysis is particularly important for understanding educational change in faith-based schooling systems where pedagogical authority is often intertwined with moral and cultural expectations (Tan, 2023; Sahin, 2022; Halstead, 2021).

Within the context of Islamic schooling, madrasah teachers traditionally occupy positions of moral, intellectual, and spiritual authority within the educational community (Tan, 2023; Sahin, 2022; Halstead, 2021). Teachers in madrasah settings are not only responsible for delivering

academic knowledge but also for guiding students' moral development and religious understanding (Sahin, 2022; Tan, 2023; Aderibigbe et al., 2023). However, recent educational reforms in many Muslim-majority countries have encouraged madrasahs to adopt innovative pedagogical approaches such as inquiry-based learning, collaborative learning, and project-based instruction (Kosim et al., 2023; Aderibigbe et al., 2023; Tan, 2023). The introduction of these pedagogies often creates tensions between traditional forms of teacher authority and emerging expectations for student-centered learning environments (Sahin, 2022; Tan, 2023; Halstead, 2021). Teachers may struggle to reconcile their role as authoritative transmitters of religious knowledge with pedagogical approaches that emphasize student agency and collaborative inquiry (Kosim et al., 2023; Aderibigbe et al., 2023; Tan, 2023). As a result, the implementation of innovative pedagogies such as PBL in madrasah contexts requires teachers to renegotiate their professional identities and authority within evolving educational landscapes (Sahin, 2022; Priestley et al., 2023; Sachs, 2023).

Despite the growing body of research on project-based learning and teacher professionalism, existing scholarship has largely focused on student learning outcomes and instructional design rather than on the professional experiences of teachers implementing innovative pedagogies (Guo et al., 2022; Kokotsaki et al., 2023; Chen & Yang, 2024). Many studies examine the effectiveness of PBL in improving academic performance and engagement but pay limited attention to how teachers interpret and negotiate their professional roles during the implementation process (Condliffe, 2022; Thomas, 2023; Krajcik & Shin, 2021). Consequently, the professional challenges faced by teachers when adopting project-based learning remain insufficiently explored in educational research (Priestley et al., 2023; Hordern, 2022; Mouta et al., 2024). Moreover, discussions about teacher authority in innovative pedagogical contexts often rely on theoretical frameworks derived from secular Western educational systems (Biesta, 2022; Sachs, 2023; Kelchtermans, 2022). This reliance limits our understanding of how teacher authority operates within educational traditions where moral and religious authority remain central components of professional identity.

Furthermore, empirical research examining the intersection between pedagogical innovation and teacher authority in Islamic educational institutions remains relatively scarce (Tan, 2023; Sahin, 2022; Aderibigbe et al., 2023). While previous studies have explored educational reform in madrasah systems, they tend to focus primarily on curriculum development, policy changes, or institutional modernization rather than on teachers' lived experiences of pedagogical transformation (Kosim et al., 2023; Tan, 2023; Aderibigbe et al., 2023). As a result, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding how madrasah teachers navigate tensions between traditional authority structures and innovative teaching practices (Sahin, 2022; Halstead, 2021; Tan, 2023). This lack of research creates an important gap in contemporary educational scholarship concerning how innovation reshapes the professional landscape of teachers in Islamic schooling contexts.

This research lies in its attempt to integrate two important yet rarely connected strands of educational scholarship: the study of project-based learning as a pedagogical innovation and the analysis of teacher authority within Islamic educational contexts (Guo et al., 2022; Tan, 2023; Sahin, 2022). By examining how madrasah teachers negotiate authority while implementing PBL, this study offers a new perspective on the professional transformation of teachers in faith-based educational institutions (Kelchtermans, 2022; Sachs, 2023; Priestley et al., 2023). Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on student outcomes, this research foregrounds teachers' professional experiences and identity negotiations in contexts where moral authority remains a central component of educational practice (Sahin, 2022; Tan, 2023; Halstead, 2021). In doing so, the study contributes to broader debates on teacher professionalism by demonstrating how pedagogical innovation interacts with culturally embedded forms of authority (Biesta, 2022; Hordern, 2022; Sachs, 2023). Consequently, the research advances a more context-sensitive understanding of educational change within Islamic schooling systems.

In response to these issues, this study aims to examine how madrasah teachers negotiate professional authority in the context of pedagogical innovation through the implementation of Project-Based Learning. Specifically, the research focuses on three key aspects: (1) how madrasah teachers conceptualize professional authority within project-based learning environments; (2)

how they navigate tensions between traditional teacher authority and student-centered pedagogical practices; and (3) how these negotiations reshape the professional identity of madrasah teachers within evolving educational contexts. By addressing these questions, the study seeks to contribute to the development of more nuanced theoretical frameworks for understanding teacher professionalism in Islamic education (Kelchtermans, 2022; Sachs, 2023; Tan, 2023). Furthermore, the research aims to expand global discussions on educational innovation by demonstrating how culturally embedded forms of teacher authority interact with contemporary pedagogical models (Biesta, 2022; Priestley et al., 2023; Hordern, 2022). Ultimately, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the changing professional landscape of madrasah teachers in the era of educational transformation.

## Literature review

The transformation of teacher professionalism in contemporary education has generated extensive scholarly debates concerning the relationship between authority, innovation, and pedagogical change within evolving learning environments (Biesta, 2022; Sachs, 2023; Hordern, 2022). Contemporary educational theory increasingly conceptualizes teacher authority not as hierarchical power but as a relational and pedagogical capacity grounded in expertise, ethical responsibility, and professional judgment (Kelchtermans, 2022; Priestley et al., 2023; Mouta et al., 2024). Within this perspective, teachers are viewed as professional agents who actively interpret and negotiate educational reforms rather than merely implementing externally imposed policies (Biesta, 2022; Sachs, 2023; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2023). Scholars further argue that the authority of teachers emerges from their ability to integrate pedagogical knowledge, contextual understanding, and ethical commitment within classroom practice (Hordern, 2022; Kelchtermans, 2022; Priestley et al., 2023). As educational systems increasingly emphasize innovation and learner-centered pedagogies, teachers are required to navigate complex professional landscapes that demand both pedagogical flexibility and institutional accountability (Mouta et al., 2024; Sachs, 2023; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2023). Consequently, understanding how teachers negotiate authority while adopting innovative pedagogical models has become a central concern within contemporary educational research (Biesta, 2022; Priestley et al., 2023; Kelchtermans, 2022).

Project-Based Learning (PBL) represents one of the most widely discussed pedagogical innovations within contemporary educational theory due to its emphasis on inquiry-based learning, collaborative knowledge construction, and authentic problem-solving (Guo et al., 2022; Kokotsaki et al., 2023; Chen & Yang, 2024). Educational scholars argue that PBL encourages students to engage actively in learning by investigating complex problems and producing meaningful artifacts that connect academic knowledge with real-world contexts (Condliffe, 2022; Thomas, 2023; Krajcik & Shin, 2021). However, the successful implementation of PBL requires teachers to transform their instructional roles from knowledge transmitters into facilitators of inquiry, collaboration, and reflective learning processes (Guo et al., 2022; Chen & Yang, 2024; Kokotsaki et al., 2023). This transformation significantly reshapes classroom authority structures because learning responsibility becomes more distributed between teachers and students (Biesta, 2022; Priestley et al., 2023; Kelchtermans, 2022). Teachers must therefore balance their professional authority with the need to empower students as active participants in the learning process (Mouta et al., 2024; Sachs, 2023; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2023). As a result, project-based learning has become a critical site for examining how pedagogical innovation influences teacher professionalism and authority in contemporary classrooms (Guo et al., 2022; Chen & Yang, 2024; Kokotsaki et al., 2023).

Another important theoretical dimension concerns the concept of teacher agency, which has emerged as a key framework for understanding how teachers respond to educational innovation and reform (Priestley et al., 2023; Kelchtermans, 2022; Hordern, 2022). Teacher agency refers to the capacity of teachers to make professional judgments, shape pedagogical practices, and influence educational change within institutional contexts (Biesta, 2022; Sachs, 2023; Priestley et al., 2023). Scholars emphasize that agency is not an individual attribute but a relational phenomenon that emerges through interactions between teachers, institutional

structures, and sociocultural contexts (Mouta et al., 2024; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2023; Kelchtermans, 2022). In the context of innovative pedagogies such as project-based learning, teacher agency plays a crucial role in determining how pedagogical reforms are interpreted and enacted in classroom practice (Guo et al., 2022; Kokotsaki et al., 2023; Chen & Yang, 2024). Teachers must exercise professional judgment in designing learning activities, guiding student inquiry, and maintaining pedagogical coherence within project-based environments (Priestley et al., 2023; Sachs, 2023; Hordern, 2022). Consequently, examining teacher agency provides important theoretical insights into how authority and innovation are negotiated within evolving professional landscapes of teaching (Biesta, 2022; Kelchtermans, 2022; Mouta et al., 2024).

Within the context of Islamic education, the concept of teacher authority carries additional moral and cultural significance because teachers are traditionally viewed as custodians of religious knowledge and moral exemplars within the educational community (Sahin, 2022; Tan, 2023; Halstead, 2021). Madrasah teachers are often expected to guide students not only academically but also ethically and spiritually, reflecting the integration of intellectual and moral education within Islamic pedagogical traditions (Sahin, 2022; Tan, 2023; Aderibigbe et al., 2023). Consequently, teacher authority in madrasah settings is deeply embedded within religious values, cultural traditions, and communal expectations surrounding the teaching profession (Halstead, 2021; Tan, 2023; Sahin, 2022). The introduction of innovative pedagogies such as project-based learning therefore presents unique challenges because teachers must reconcile student-centered learning approaches with established educational traditions that emphasize moral authority and structured knowledge transmission (Kosim et al., 2023; Tan, 2023; Aderibigbe et al., 2023). Scholars argue that such tensions require teachers to reinterpret their professional roles while maintaining the ethical and pedagogical integrity of Islamic educational traditions (Sahin, 2022; Halstead, 2021; Tan, 2023). These dynamics highlight the importance of developing theoretical frameworks that integrate educational innovation with culturally embedded understandings of teacher authority in Islamic schooling contexts (Aderibigbe et al., 2023; Kosim et al., 2023; Tan, 2023).

Recent scholarship on educational reform also emphasizes the importance of contextualizing pedagogical innovation within specific institutional and cultural environments (Hordern, 2022; Mouta et al., 2024; Priestley et al., 2023). Scholars argue that innovative pedagogies cannot be successfully implemented without considering the professional beliefs, institutional norms, and sociocultural values that shape teachers' practices (Biesta, 2022; Sachs, 2023; Kelchtermans, 2022). Within madrasah contexts, these factors are particularly significant because educational practices are often closely intertwined with religious traditions and community expectations (Sahin, 2022; Tan, 2023; Halstead, 2021). Consequently, pedagogical innovations such as project-based learning must be interpreted and adapted within these cultural and institutional frameworks rather than simply transferred from secular educational models (Kosim et al., 2023; Aderibigbe et al., 2023; Tan, 2023). Researchers therefore emphasize the importance of examining how teachers negotiate the relationship between innovation and tradition within specific educational settings (Priestley et al., 2023; Hordern, 2022; Mouta et al., 2024). Such an approach enables a more nuanced understanding of how teacher professionalism evolves in response to educational change within diverse sociocultural contexts (Biesta, 2022; Sachs, 2023; Kelchtermans, 2022).

Taken together, the theoretical discussion suggests that the professional landscape of teaching is increasingly shaped by interactions between pedagogical innovation, teacher authority, and institutional context (Biesta, 2022; Sachs, 2023; Hordern, 2022). Project-Based Learning represents a significant pedagogical innovation that has the potential to transform classroom learning environments while simultaneously redefining teacher roles and professional identities (Guo et al., 2022; Chen & Yang, 2024; Kokotsaki et al., 2023). However, the implementation of such innovation requires teachers to negotiate their authority, agency, and professional responsibilities within evolving educational systems (Priestley et al., 2023; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2023; Kelchtermans, 2022). In madrasah contexts, these negotiations become particularly complex because teacher authority is intertwined with religious, cultural, and ethical expectations surrounding the teaching profession (Sahin, 2022; Tan, 2023; Halstead, 2021). Understanding how teachers navigate these dynamics therefore provides important

theoretical insights into the changing professional landscape of madrasah teachers in contemporary education (Kosim et al., 2023; Aderibigbe et al., 2023; Tan, 2023). Such insights contribute to broader discussions on how educational innovation can be integrated with culturally grounded forms of teacher professionalism in Islamic education systems (Biesta, 2022; Sachs, 2023; Priestley et al., 2023).

## **Method**

### **Research design**

This study employs a qualitative research design with a case study approach to explore how madrasah teachers negotiate professional authority while implementing Project-Based Learning (PBL) in contemporary Islamic educational settings. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for investigating complex social phenomena because it enables researchers to understand participants' perspectives, experiences, and interpretations within their natural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2023). Scholars argue that qualitative case studies are especially effective for examining educational processes that involve institutional culture, professional identity, and pedagogical practices in real-life contexts (Yin, 2022; Stake, 2021). In educational research, case study approaches allow researchers to investigate how teachers interpret and respond to educational reforms within specific institutional environments (Tight, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2023). The choice of this approach is therefore appropriate because the study seeks to capture the nuanced ways in which teachers negotiate authority and innovation within madrasah classrooms. Moreover, qualitative inquiry provides the flexibility necessary to analyze the interactions between pedagogical innovation, teacher agency, and cultural traditions that shape teaching practices in Islamic schooling contexts (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023; Creswell & Poth, 2022).

### **Research site and participants**

The research was conducted in several madrasah tsanawiyah institutions in Pekanbaru and Kampar, Indonesia, where Project-Based Learning (PBL) has been introduced as part of pedagogical innovation within Islamic education systems. Madrasahs represent a distinctive educational setting in which teachers are expected not only to deliver academic instruction but also to cultivate students' moral character, religious awareness, and ethical conduct in accordance with Islamic pedagogical traditions (Sahin, 2022; Tan, 2023). In such contexts, teachers often occupy positions of moral and intellectual authority within the school community because they function simultaneously as educators, mentors, and role models who guide students' spiritual and social development (Halstead, 2021; Sahin, 2022). The introduction of student-centered pedagogies such as Project-Based Learning therefore presents an important opportunity to examine how teachers negotiate their professional authority while facilitating collaborative inquiry and experiential learning processes. Scholars argue that the professional practices of teachers are deeply shaped by institutional culture, educational reform agendas, and sociocultural expectations surrounding the teaching profession (Kelchtermans, 2022; Priestley et al., 2023). Consequently, investigating teacher experiences in madrasah settings provides valuable insights into how pedagogical innovation interacts with culturally embedded forms of authority in Islamic schooling contexts. This study therefore focuses on madrasah teachers whose classroom practices reflect ongoing efforts to integrate innovative pedagogical models with the ethical and educational traditions of Islamic education.

The participants of this study consisted of 25 madrasah teachers who have experience implementing Project-Based Learning in their classroom practice, selected through purposive sampling to ensure that the participants possessed relevant professional knowledge and practical experience related to the research phenomenon. Purposive sampling is widely recognized in qualitative research as an effective strategy for selecting information-rich participants who can provide meaningful insights into complex professional practices and institutional dynamics (Creswell & Poth, 2022; Palinkas et al., 2022). Scholars emphasize that qualitative studies examining teacher professionalism benefit from purposive participant selection because it allows researchers to explore diverse professional perspectives within specific educational contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2023; Patton, 2021). The selection criteria for participants included several

key characteristics: (1) being a certified madrasah teacher with at least five years of teaching experience; (2) actively teaching in a madrasah institution that has introduced project-based learning as part of its instructional innovation; (3) having practical experience in designing or facilitating project-based learning activities in the classroom; (4) willingness to participate in interviews and classroom observations; and (5) representing diverse subject areas within the madrasah curriculum such as Islamic studies, language education, and social sciences. These criteria ensured that the participants possessed sufficient professional experience to reflect critically on the negotiation of authority and pedagogical innovation in their teaching practices. The final group of 25 participants consisted of 14 male teachers and 11 female teachers, representing a range of professional backgrounds and teaching experiences within the madrasah system. Through this purposive selection process, the study aims to capture diverse perspectives on how teachers interpret and enact their professional authority while implementing project-based learning in contemporary madrasah classrooms.

### **Data collection**

Data for this study were collected primarily through in-depth interviews, which served as the central method for exploring how madrasah teachers negotiate professional authority while implementing Project-Based Learning in their pedagogical practice. In qualitative educational research, in-depth interviews are widely recognized as an effective method for examining participants' lived experiences, professional interpretations, and reflective understandings of complex social phenomena (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2022). Interview-based inquiry enables researchers to access participants' subjective perspectives and interpretive meanings that cannot easily be captured through structured quantitative instruments (Rubin & Rubin, 2021; Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). This approach was particularly appropriate because the study aimed to investigate teachers' professional experiences, identity negotiations, and interpretations of pedagogical innovation within the sociocultural context of madrasah education. Since teacher authority and pedagogical innovation are contextually embedded and multifaceted phenomena, in-depth interviews allow researchers to obtain detailed narrative accounts that reveal how teachers interpret their professional roles and responsibilities in practice (Kelchtermans, 2022; Priestley et al., 2023). Therefore, relying on interviews enabled the researchers to generate rich qualitative data concerning teachers' reflections, decision-making processes, and professional negotiations within innovative learning environments.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences while ensuring alignment with the research objectives. Semi-structured interviews combine guided questioning with conversational flexibility, enabling participants to provide detailed explanations of their professional perspectives (Rubin & Rubin, 2021; Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). An interview protocol was developed to explore key themes, including teachers' understanding of project-based learning, their experiences implementing PBL in madrasah classrooms, and their perceptions of how pedagogical innovation influences their professional authority and identity. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was conducted individually to ensure that participants could express their views freely. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to maintain data accuracy and support systematic thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2022). The data collection procedure involved obtaining institutional permission, securing informed consent from participants, scheduling interviews at mutually convenient times, and transcribing the recordings after each session. This systematic process ensured that the data collection was conducted ethically and rigorously in accordance with qualitative research standards (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2022; Savin-Baden & Major, 2023).

### **Data analysis**

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative analytic method that focuses on identifying patterns, themes, and meanings within textual data. Thematic analysis is widely used in educational research because it provides a systematic approach to organizing and interpreting qualitative data while remaining flexible to different theoretical perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Nowell et al., 2021). The analysis followed several stages, including data

familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, and interpretation of findings. During the familiarization stage, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were read repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Subsequently, initial codes were generated to capture key ideas related to teacher authority, pedagogical innovation, and project-based learning practices. These codes were then organized into broader themes that reflected recurring patterns in teachers' experiences and professional interpretations (Nowell et al., 2021). Thematic analysis allowed the researchers to identify how teachers negotiate authority and innovation within their professional practice and how these negotiations reshape the professional landscape of madrasah teachers.

### **Trustworthiness and research ethics**

To ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the research, several strategies were implemented throughout the research process. Credibility was enhanced through data triangulation by combining interviews, observations, and document analysis to capture multiple perspectives on the research phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2022; Patton, 2021). Member checking was also conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with participants to confirm the accuracy of the findings and ensure that the interpretations reflected their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2023; Lincoln & Guba, 2021). In addition, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process to acknowledge the researcher's positionality and minimize potential biases during data interpretation (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023; Tracy, 2020). Ethical considerations were carefully observed by obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring confidentiality, and protecting participants' anonymity in reporting the research findings (Israel & Hay, 2021). These procedures were implemented to uphold ethical research standards and to maintain the integrity of the qualitative inquiry.

## **Results**

### **Madrasah teachers' conceptualization of professional authority in project-based learning environments**

The thematic analysis indicates that madrasah teachers conceptualize professional authority in project-based learning environments as a form of pedagogical guidance grounded in expertise and moral credibility rather than hierarchical control. Participants consistently emphasized that authority is not eliminated in student-centered learning but rather transformed into a relational form of leadership that guides students' inquiry processes. Informant 3 (INT-03) explained, *"In project-based learning the teacher still has authority, but it is expressed differently. Instead of dominating the classroom, we guide students in investigating problems and encourage them to construct knowledge independently."* Similarly, Informant 7 (INT-07) stated, *"Authority becomes meaningful when the teacher helps students explore ideas critically rather than simply telling them what to think."* This perspective was reinforced by Informant 11 (INT-11) who noted, *"Students respect the teacher not because the teacher controls every step of learning but because the teacher provides direction and intellectual guidance during the project."* These narratives indicate that teachers interpret professional authority as a pedagogical capacity to mentor students' intellectual exploration within collaborative learning environments.

Another key theme concerns the *ethical foundation of authority in madrasah education*. Teachers emphasized that authority is closely associated with moral integrity and exemplary conduct, reflecting the broader ethical framework of Islamic education. Informant 2 (INT-02) explained, *"In the madrasah environment authority is not only academic; it is also moral. Students observe how teachers behave and whether they demonstrate the values they teach."* Similarly, Informant 14 (INT-14) stated, *"When teachers show fairness, patience, and wisdom during project discussions, students naturally respect their authority."* This view was echoed by Informant 20 (INT-20) who remarked, *"Authority grows from trust. Students trust teachers who demonstrate ethical consistency and sincerity in guiding them."* These findings demonstrate that professional authority in madrasah classrooms is deeply intertwined with *ethical leadership and moral credibility*.

The data also reveal that authority in project-based learning is increasingly constructed through *dialogue and collaborative engagement* between teachers and students. Teachers

reported that PBL encourages more interactive classroom relationships in which authority emerges through intellectual exchange rather than unilateral instruction. Informant 4 (INT-04) noted, *“During project discussions students often present ideas that challenge our perspectives, and the teacher must engage with them thoughtfully.”* Likewise, Informant 8 (INT-08) explained, *“Authority in this environment comes from guiding the discussion and helping students refine their arguments.”* Informant 15 (INT-15) further emphasized, *“The teacher becomes a facilitator who encourages students to explore knowledge responsibly.”* These reflections illustrate that authority is reinterpreted as *a dialogical process embedded within collaborative learning practices.*

Another dimension of authority identified in the analysis relates to *pedagogical expertise and intellectual credibility.* Teachers emphasized that guiding project-based learning requires advanced instructional competence and subject mastery. Informant 5 (INT-05) stated, *“Students respect teachers who can help them analyze complex problems during their projects.”* Similarly, Informant 16 (INT-16) explained, *“Authority is strengthened when the teacher can connect theoretical concepts with real-life situations explored in projects.”* Informant 21 (INT-21) added, *“When students realize that the teacher can guide them through difficult ideas, they become more confident in the teacher’s leadership.”* These narratives suggest that authority in PBL environments is reinforced through *pedagogical competence and intellectual mentorship.*

Teachers also described authority as involving *balancing student autonomy with instructional structure.* While project-based learning encourages independent inquiry, teachers remain responsible for maintaining the academic direction of the learning process. Informant 12 (INT-12) explained, *“Students are encouraged to explore ideas freely, but the teacher must ensure that the discussion remains focused and productive.”* Similarly, Informant 18 (INT-18) noted, *“Without teacher guidance, projects can become disorganized and students may lose the learning objective.”* Informant 22 (INT-22) added, *“Authority means maintaining structure while allowing students to develop their creativity.”* These insights highlight the continuing importance of *teacher leadership within innovative pedagogical environments.*

Overall, the findings suggest that madrasah teachers conceptualize professional authority as a *dynamic form of pedagogical and moral leadership.* Authority is enacted through expertise, ethical conduct, and collaborative engagement with students rather than through rigid hierarchical control. Informant 1 (INT-01) stated, *“Authority today is about guiding students to become responsible learners.”* Informant 10 (INT-10) similarly explained, *“The teacher must inspire students to think independently while maintaining educational discipline.”* Informant 24 (INT-24) concluded, *“project-based learning transforms authority into mentorship.”*

### **Navigating tensions between traditional authority and student-centered pedagogy**

The second theme emerging from the thematic analysis concerns how madrasah teachers negotiate the tensions between traditional forms of teacher authority and the principles of student-centered pedagogy embedded in project-based learning. Participants reported that the transition from conventional lecture-based instruction to inquiry-oriented learning initially created uncertainty regarding classroom management, instructional roles, and the distribution of authority within the learning process. Many teachers explained that traditional madrasah teaching practices emphasize structured explanation, direct instruction, and clear teacher control over the flow of knowledge. Informant 9 (INT-09) explained this shift by stating, *“Previously we explained the material directly to students and they listened carefully, but in project-based learning we must allow students to investigate problems on their own and present their ideas.”* Similarly, Informant 13 (INT-13) reflected on the pedagogical adjustment required by noting, *“The shift from lecture-based teaching to project learning required us to rethink our teaching habits because students are now more active in constructing knowledge.”* This experience was reinforced by Informant 17 (INT-17), who emphasized the importance of developing trust in students’ intellectual abilities, explaining, *“Teachers must learn to trust that students are capable of exploring knowledge independently, even though at first we feel uncertain about giving them that freedom.”* These reflections demonstrate that the adoption of project-based learning requires teachers to renegotiate long-established pedagogical norms and reconsider their authority within the classroom.

Participants also described the complexity of balancing instructional guidance with student autonomy when implementing project-based learning. Teachers emphasized that while PBL encourages students to take greater responsibility for their own learning, teachers remain accountable for ensuring that learning objectives are achieved and that classroom activities remain focused. Informant 6 (INT-06) explained the delicate nature of this balance by stating, *"The teacher must constantly decide when to intervene and when to allow students to continue exploring their ideas independently."* Similarly, Informant 19 (INT-19) highlighted the risks associated with excessive control or insufficient guidance, explaining, *"Too much control prevents students from developing creativity, but too little guidance may lead to confusion and ineffective learning."* This view was echoed by Informant 23 (INT-23), who noted, *"The challenge for teachers is maintaining discipline in the classroom while encouraging students to become independent thinkers."* These narratives illustrate that implementing student-centered pedagogies requires teachers to exercise nuanced pedagogical judgment in determining how authority should be enacted in different learning situations.

Another tension identified in the interviews relates to the cultural and institutional expectations surrounding teacher authority in madrasah contexts. Participants noted that teachers in Islamic educational environments are often perceived as authoritative figures who are responsible not only for transmitting knowledge but also for providing moral and religious guidance to students. Informant 18 (INT-18) explained that these expectations sometimes influence how innovative pedagogies are received within the school community, stating, *"Parents and students often expect teachers to provide clear explanations rather than open-ended discussions because they see the teacher as the main source of knowledge."* Similarly, Informant 21 (INT-21) emphasized the moral dimension of teacher authority by explaining, *"In Islamic education teachers are seen as moral guides who provide direction for students' intellectual and spiritual development."* Informant 25 (INT-25) further noted that the introduction of student-centered pedagogies can sometimes challenge these established expectations, explaining, *"When we introduce project-based learning, some people question whether students will still respect the authority of the teacher."* These reflections highlight the cultural complexity involved in implementing pedagogical innovation within religious educational settings.

To address these tensions, many teachers reported adopting hybrid instructional strategies that combine elements of traditional teaching with project-based inquiry. Participants explained that integrating structured explanation with collaborative project work allows them to maintain pedagogical authority while encouraging active student engagement. Informant 6 (INT-06) described this approach by stating, *"We usually begin the lesson with a clear explanation of the topic so that students understand the basic concepts, and then we ask them to explore the ideas further through projects."* Similarly, Informant 14 (INT-14) explained, *"Combining lectures with project activities helps students understand theoretical concepts before applying them in practical situations."* This strategy was also highlighted by Informant 20 (INT-20), who noted, *"This combination allows teachers to maintain authority while still encouraging students to participate actively in the learning process."* These practices demonstrate how teachers creatively adapt pedagogical innovations to align with established educational traditions.

Teachers also emphasized the importance of reflective questioning as a pedagogical strategy for guiding students without dominating the learning process. Rather than providing immediate answers, teachers reported encouraging students to think critically and arrive at conclusions through guided inquiry. Informant 2 (INT-02) explained this approach by stating, *"Instead of giving students the answer directly, I ask questions that encourage them to analyze the problem more deeply."* Similarly, Informant 7 (INT-07) noted, *"Students learn more effectively when teachers guide their thinking through questions rather than simply providing explanations."* Informant 12 (INT-12) added that questioning strategies help maintain teacher authority while supporting student autonomy, explaining, *"When teachers ask reflective questions, students still see the teacher as a guide but also feel encouraged to think independently."* These reflections suggest that dialogical teaching strategies play an important role in reconciling traditional authority with student-centered learning.

Overall, the thematic findings indicate that madrasah teachers reinterpret authority as a form of facilitative leadership rather than authoritarian control. Teachers emphasized that the

shift toward student-centered pedagogies does not eliminate teacher authority but instead transforms how it is exercised within the classroom. Informant 3 (INT-03) explained this transformation by stating, *“Authority is still present in the classroom, but it is expressed through guidance and mentorship rather than through strict control.”* Similarly, Informant 10 (INT-10) observed that teachers must continuously adapt their professional roles to respond to pedagogical innovation, noting, *“Teachers must adjust their authority to the demands of new learning models.”* Informant 24 (INT-24) concluded that educational innovation ultimately requires teachers to redefine their professional identity and authority within contemporary learning environments, explaining, *“Innovation in teaching requires teachers to rethink how authority should function in modern classrooms.”* These findings suggest that the negotiation between authority and innovation represents a key dimension of the evolving professional landscape of madrasah teachers.

### **Reshaping the professional identity of madrasah teachers**

The third theme emerging from the thematic analysis concerns how the negotiation between pedagogical innovation and traditional authority reshapes the professional identity of madrasah teachers within evolving educational contexts. Participants consistently reported that the implementation of project-based learning encouraged them to reconsider their roles as educators and to reinterpret the meaning of professionalism within Islamic schooling environments. Rather than perceiving themselves primarily as transmitters of knowledge, teachers increasingly viewed their professional identity as centered on guiding students through inquiry-based learning processes and facilitating meaningful intellectual exploration. Informant 1 (INT-01) explained that the adoption of project-based learning prompted a significant shift in his perception of teaching, stating, *“Through project-based learning I realized that teaching is not only about delivering knowledge but about guiding students to discover understanding through their own investigation.”* This reflection was reinforced by Informant 8 (INT-08), who emphasized the evolving pedagogical role of teachers, explaining, *“Teachers today must design learning experiences that allow students to engage actively with knowledge rather than simply receive information.”* Similarly, Informant 16 (INT-16) highlighted the transformation of teacher roles within contemporary madrasah education by stating, *“Our professional role is gradually shifting from being lecturers in front of the classroom to becoming mentors who accompany students in their intellectual development.”* These narratives indicate that the introduction of innovative pedagogies such as project-based learning contributes to the emergence of a more facilitative and student-oriented conception of teacher professionalism.

Participants also emphasized that pedagogical innovation requires teachers to develop greater creativity and flexibility in their instructional practices, thereby influencing the way they understand their professional identity. Teachers reported that designing and facilitating project-based learning activities demands continuous reflection, experimentation, and adaptation. Informant 17 (INT-17) explained that innovative pedagogies challenge teachers to rethink the structure of classroom learning, noting, *“Project-based learning requires teachers to think creatively about how learning activities are organized so that students can explore ideas in meaningful ways.”* In a similar vein, Informant 5 (INT-05) stated that pedagogical innovation encourages teachers to continuously improve their instructional strategies, remarking, *“Teachers cannot rely on the same methods for many years; we must adapt our teaching approaches to the needs of students.”* Informant 22 (INT-22) further emphasized that innovation has become an integral component of professional responsibility within contemporary education, explaining, *“Innovation is now part of what it means to be a professional teacher because we must prepare students for a rapidly changing world.”* These reflections illustrate that teachers increasingly associate professionalism with adaptability, creativity, and ongoing pedagogical development.

Another significant dimension of teacher identity emerging from the findings concerns the continuing importance of ethical and spiritual leadership within madrasah education. While participants acknowledged the value of innovative pedagogies, they emphasized that pedagogical transformation must remain grounded in the ethical principles and moral values that characterize Islamic educational traditions. Informant 13 (INT-13) explained that the adoption of modern teaching approaches does not diminish the teacher’s moral responsibilities, stating, *“Even when*

*we apply new pedagogical models, teachers must continue to demonstrate ethical behavior and become role models for students.*" Similarly, Informant 21 (INT-21) emphasized the central role of Islamic values in shaping professional identity, noting, *"Our professional identity as madrasah teachers is always connected to the moral values of Islam, which guide how we teach and interact with students."* This perspective was reinforced by Informant 11 (INT-11), who explained, *"Innovation should strengthen the ethical dimension of teaching rather than replace it, because the moral development of students remains a fundamental objective of education."* These insights demonstrate that teachers perceive their professional identity as an integration of pedagogical innovation and ethical leadership.

The findings also highlight the importance of collaborative professional learning in shaping the evolving identity of madrasah teachers. Participants reported that the implementation of project-based learning encouraged greater interaction and knowledge exchange among teachers, contributing to the development of collective professional expertise. Informant 19 (INT-19) explained that teachers frequently share ideas about project design and classroom strategies, stating, *"We often discuss how to organize projects effectively and how to guide students through the learning process."* Similarly, Informant 23 (INT-23) observed that collaboration among teachers facilitates continuous professional improvement, explaining, *"When teachers discuss their experiences with project-based learning, it helps us refine our teaching approaches."* Informant 4 (INT-04) further emphasized that these discussions contribute to the formation of supportive professional communities within madrasah institutions, noting, *"Professional dialogue among teachers creates a collaborative environment where we can learn from each other's experiences."* These narratives illustrate how professional identity is increasingly shaped by collective learning and collegial interaction.

Participants also described how the adoption of project-based learning strengthened their sense of professional agency and confidence as educators capable of responding to contemporary educational challenges. Teachers reported that designing innovative learning activities allowed them to exercise greater creativity and autonomy in their instructional practices. Informant 14 (INT-14) explained, *"Teachers feel more empowered when they are able to design learning activities that encourage students to explore ideas independently."* Similarly, Informant 18 (INT-18) stated that pedagogical innovation enables teachers to address new educational demands, noting, *"Innovation helps teachers respond to the challenges of modern education where students must develop critical and creative thinking skills."* Informant 20 (INT-20) further emphasized that professional growth occurs through experimentation and reflection, explaining, *"Teachers develop professionally when they try new teaching approaches and reflect on the results."* These reflections indicate that project-based learning contributes to the strengthening of teachers' professional agency and reflective practice.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that the negotiation between traditional authority and pedagogical innovation leads to the emergence of a more reflective, adaptive, and ethically grounded professional identity among madrasah teachers. Participants emphasized that contemporary madrasah education requires teachers to balance respect for educational traditions with openness to pedagogical change. Informant 24 (INT-24) explained, *"Madrasah teachers must maintain the educational values of Islamic tradition while also adapting to modern teaching approaches."* Similarly, Informant 25 (INT-25) highlighted the importance of integrating religious values with innovative pedagogy, stating, *"The future of madrasah education depends on teachers who can combine Islamic values with modern educational practices."* Informant 3 (INT-03) concluded that professional identity in contemporary madrasah education is defined by the ability to guide students ethically while embracing pedagogical transformation, explaining, *"Being a professional teacher today means guiding students with moral responsibility while continuously adapting to new educational ideas."* These findings demonstrate that the evolving professional landscape of madrasah education is characterized by a dynamic synthesis of tradition, innovation, and ethical leadership.

## Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that madrasah teachers increasingly reinterpret professional authority within project-based learning environments as a form of pedagogical leadership grounded in facilitation, dialogue, and ethical credibility rather than hierarchical control (Biesta, 2023; Kelchtermans, 2022; Sukenti, & Tambak, 2024; Hordern, 2022). Contemporary educational scholarship emphasizes that teacher authority in modern learning environments is shifting from directive transmission toward relational and epistemic guidance that supports students' independent knowledge construction (Priestley et al., 2023; Zhao, 2022; OECD, 2023). This transformation reflects broader international reforms that encourage inquiry-based learning and collaborative problem-solving as key competencies for twenty-first century education (Tambak & Sukenti, 2024; OECD, 2023; Mercer & Howe, 2023; Campbell, 2023). Within such contexts, teachers are expected to exercise authority not by controlling knowledge delivery but by orchestrating learning environments that stimulate critical thinking and intellectual engagement (Biesta, 2023; Hordern, 2022; Priestley et al., 2023). The present findings therefore confirm that pedagogical innovation such as project-based learning requires teachers to redefine authority as a facilitative and dialogical practice that supports student agency (Zhao, 2022; Mercer & Howe, 2023; Campbell, 2023). Similar developments have been observed in global education systems where teachers increasingly function as mentors and learning designers rather than solely as transmitters of disciplinary knowledge (Kelchtermans, 2022; Priestley et al., 2023; OECD, 2023). Consequently, the reinterpretation of teacher authority identified in this study reflects broader shifts in contemporary teacher professionalism that emphasize relational trust, collaborative learning, and pedagogical adaptability (Biesta, 2023; Hordern, 2022; Campbell, 2023).

The findings also reveal that teachers experience significant tensions when negotiating the transition from traditional authority structures toward student-centered pedagogical practices, a challenge widely discussed in recent international research on educational reform (Priestley et al., 2023; Tambak et al., 2018; Kelchtermans, 2022; Zhao, 2022). Teachers in many educational contexts initially perceive inquiry-based learning as potentially weakening classroom control because it redistributes epistemic authority from teachers to learners (Biesta, 2023; Campbell, 2023; Hordern, 2022). However, recent studies demonstrate that such pedagogical transformations do not eliminate teacher authority but instead reposition it as a form of intellectual guidance that structures collaborative learning processes (Mercer & Howe, 2023; OECD, 2023; Priestley et al., 2023). The findings of this study therefore align with international evidence suggesting that the adoption of student-centered pedagogies requires teachers to renegotiate their professional roles and teaching identities (Kelchtermans, 2022; Biesta, 2023; Zhao, 2022). This negotiation process involves balancing institutional expectations, classroom management, and student autonomy within dynamic learning environments (Hordern, 2022; Campbell, 2023; OECD, 2023). Such tensions are particularly visible in educational systems with strong traditions of teacher-centered instruction where the authority of teachers has historically been associated with structured knowledge transmission (Priestley et al., 2023; Zhao, 2022; Mercer & Howe, 2023). Therefore, the experiences reported by madrasah teachers reflect a broader global pattern of pedagogical transformation in which teachers must continuously reinterpret their professional authority (Biesta, 2023; Kelchtermans, 2022; Campbell, 2023).

Within the context of madrasah education, the negotiation of authority takes on additional significance because teachers are not only instructional leaders but also moral and spiritual guides within Islamic educational traditions (Sahin, 2022; Tan, 2023; Halstead, 2022). Islamic educational philosophy historically conceptualizes teachers as *murabbi*, *mu'allim*, and *mu'addib*, figures responsible for nurturing intellectual development while cultivating moral and spiritual character (Sahin, 2022; Tan, 2023; Halstead, 2022). Consequently, the reinterpretation of teacher authority identified in this study does not imply a rejection of traditional educational values but rather their adaptation within new pedagogical frameworks (Tan, 2023; Sahin, 2022; Halstead, 2022). Teachers continue to perceive their professional roles as grounded in ethical responsibility and moral leadership even while adopting innovative teaching approaches (Sahin, 2022; Tan, 2023; Campbell, 2023). This integration reflects the broader objective of Islamic education to harmonize intellectual inquiry with moral formation and spiritual awareness (Halstead, 2022;

Sahin, 2022; Tan, 2023). The findings therefore illustrate how pedagogical innovation within madrasah contexts can coexist with Islamic educational philosophy rather than undermining it (Sahin, 2022; Tan, 2023; Campbell, 2023). Such compatibility demonstrates the adaptability of Islamic educational traditions in responding to contemporary educational challenges.

Another important dimension of the findings concerns the cultural expectations surrounding teacher authority in madrasah communities, where teachers are often regarded as custodians of religious knowledge and moral exemplars (Halstead, 2022; Tan, 2023; Sahin, 2022). These expectations shape how teachers interpret pedagogical innovation and how students and parents respond to new learning models (Tan, 2023; Halstead, 2022; Sukenti, & Tambak, 2025; Campbell, 2023). In many Islamic educational contexts, teachers are expected to demonstrate strong moral leadership and provide guidance for students' intellectual and ethical development (Sahin, 2022; Halstead, 2022; Tan, 2023). Consequently, the adoption of student-centered pedagogies sometimes generates concerns about maintaining respect for teacher authority (Campbell, 2023; Hordern, 2022; Zhao, 2022). However, the findings suggest that teachers reinterpret authority in ways that maintain moral leadership while encouraging student participation in knowledge construction (Biesta, 2023; Priestley et al., 2023; Mercer & Howe, 2023). This reinterpretation demonstrates how cultural and religious values can shape the implementation of pedagogical reform (Tan, 2023; Sahin, 2022; Halstead, 2022). Therefore, understanding teacher authority within madrasah education requires attention to the sociocultural and religious contexts in which teaching practices occur.

The study also highlights the role of hybrid pedagogical strategies that combine traditional instruction with project-based learning practices, a pattern widely observed in contemporary educational reform (OECD, 2023; Gusrianto et al., 2025; Zhao, 2022; Mercer & Howe, 2023). Hybrid pedagogies enable teachers to maintain instructional structure while promoting inquiry-based learning and collaborative engagement (Priestley et al., 2023; Campbell, 2023; Hordern, 2022). Such approaches recognize that effective teaching requires both guided instruction and opportunities for students to explore knowledge independently (Biesta, 2023; OECD, 2023; Zhao, 2022). Within madrasah classrooms, hybrid pedagogies allow teachers to preserve traditional educational values while implementing innovative teaching methods (Tan, 2023; Sahin, 2022; Halstead, 2022). The findings therefore suggest that hybrid pedagogical models may represent a practical pathway for integrating educational innovation within religious educational institutions (OECD, 2023; Priestley et al., 2023; Zhao, 2022). This approach also reflects broader trends in international education that emphasize flexible and context-sensitive teaching strategies (Biesta, 2023; Campbell, 2023; Mercer & Howe, 2023). Consequently, hybrid pedagogies provide an effective framework for balancing continuity and change within madrasah education.

Another key insight emerging from the findings concerns the development of dialogical authority through questioning and reflective discussion. Dialogic teaching has become an influential pedagogical framework in contemporary education because it encourages critical thinking and collaborative knowledge construction (Mercer & Howe, 2023; Alexander, 2022; Zhao, 2022). Teachers who adopt dialogical approaches maintain intellectual leadership while encouraging students to engage actively in the learning process (Biesta, 2023; Campbell, 2023; Mercer & Howe, 2023; Abdullah et al., 2025). The findings therefore support recent research suggesting that dialogic pedagogy enhances students' conceptual understanding and critical reasoning abilities (Alexander, 2022; OECD, 2023; Priestley et al., 2023). Within madrasah education, dialogical teaching may also reflect the Islamic intellectual tradition of scholarly dialogue and inquiry, which historically emphasized debate and reflective discussion in the pursuit of knowledge (Sahin, 2022; Tan, 2023; Halstead, 2022). Consequently, dialogical authority can be interpreted as a pedagogical practice that aligns both with contemporary educational research and with Islamic intellectual traditions.

The results of the study further demonstrate that the implementation of project-based learning contributes to the transformation of teachers' professional identities. Teachers increasingly view themselves as facilitators, mentors, and learning designers who guide students' intellectual development (Kelchtermans, 2022; Chapakiya et al., 2025; Tambak & Sukent, 2020; Biesta, 2023; Priestley et al., 2023). Contemporary educational research highlights that teacher identity is not a fixed attribute but a dynamic construct shaped by professional experiences and

institutional contexts (Hordern, 2022; Campbell, 2023; Kelchtermans, 2022). Pedagogical innovation therefore plays a significant role in reshaping how teachers perceive their professional responsibilities (Biesta, 2023; Zhao, 2022; Priestley et al., 2023). The findings suggest that project-based learning encourages teachers to adopt more reflective and adaptive professional identities (Kelchtermans, 2022; Hordern, 2022; Campbell, 2023). Such transformations are consistent with international discussions on teacher professionalism emphasizing lifelong learning and continuous pedagogical development (OECD, 2023; Zhao, 2022; Priestley et al., 2023). Consequently, the evolving professional identity of madrasah teachers reflects broader global trends in teacher education and professional development.

The findings also highlight the importance of collaborative professional learning among teachers as a catalyst for pedagogical innovation. Teachers reported that sharing experiences and discussing instructional strategies with colleagues contributed significantly to their professional growth (Priestley et al., 2023; OECD, 2023; Hordern, 2022). Collaborative professional learning communities have been widely recognized as essential mechanisms for supporting educational reform (Campbell, 2023; Zhao, 2022; Kelchtermans, 2022). Through professional dialogue, teachers can exchange knowledge, reflect on their practices, and collectively address instructional challenges (OECD, 2023; Priestley et al., 2023; Mercer & Howe, 2023). Within madrasah institutions, such collaboration may also facilitate the integration of Islamic values with contemporary pedagogical approaches (Sahin, 2022; Tan, 2023; Halstead, 2022). Therefore, professional collaboration represents a critical dimension of teacher professionalism in both Islamic and international educational contexts (Biesta, 2023; Campbell, 2023; Priestley et al., 2023).

From a national and global perspective, the transformations identified in this study reflect broader educational reforms emphasizing creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving as key competencies for future learning (OECD, 2023; Zhao, 2022; Biesta, 2023). Many countries are reforming their education systems to move beyond memorization-based learning toward inquiry-based pedagogies (Priestley et al., 2023; Mercer & Howe, 2023; Campbell, 2023). The adoption of project-based learning in madrasah education therefore represents part of a wider global movement toward student-centered education (OECD, 2023; Zhao, 2022; Biesta, 2023). At the same time, the findings demonstrate that such reforms must be adapted to local cultural and religious contexts (Tan, 2023; Sahin, 2022; Halstead, 2022). This contextual adaptation ensures that educational innovation remains aligned with the values and objectives of Islamic education (Sahin, 2022; Tan, 2023; Halstead, 2022). Consequently, the transformation of teacher authority within madrasah classrooms reflects both global educational change and local cultural continuity.

Overall, the findings suggest that negotiating authority and innovation represents a central challenge in the evolving professional landscape of madrasah teachers. Teachers must simultaneously maintain moral leadership rooted in Islamic educational traditions while adapting to new pedagogical models that emphasize student agency and collaborative learning (Sahin, 2022; Tan, 2023; Halstead, 2022). The reinterpretation of authority identified in this study demonstrates that pedagogical innovation does not necessarily weaken teacher professionalism but instead reshapes it into more relational and reflective forms (Biesta, 2023; Kelchtermans, 2022; Campbell, 2023). By integrating Islamic ethical values with contemporary pedagogical approaches, madrasah teachers contribute to the development of educational models that are both culturally grounded and pedagogically innovative (Tan, 2023; Sahin, 2022; OECD, 2023). Therefore, the transformation of teacher authority within madrasah education represents an important example of how religious educational institutions can respond constructively to the demands of modern education while preserving their distinctive educational identity (Halstead, 2022; Tan, 2023; Biesta, 2023).

## Conclusion

This study explored how madrasah teachers negotiate professional authority within project-based learning environments and how these negotiations reshape their professional identity in contemporary Islamic education. The findings demonstrate that teacher authority in madrasah classrooms is gradually transforming from hierarchical knowledge transmission

toward dialogical pedagogical leadership characterized by facilitation, inquiry, and ethical guidance. Rather than diminishing teacher authority, project-based learning reconfigures it into a relational form of leadership that supports students' active engagement in knowledge construction while maintaining teachers' moral and intellectual influence in the classroom. Importantly, madrasah teachers continue to ground their professional identity in Islamic educational concepts such as *murabbi*, *mu'allim*, and *mu'addib*, thereby integrating pedagogical innovation with Islamic moral responsibility. This dynamic synthesis indicates that educational innovation in madrasah contexts does not undermine traditional Islamic educational values but instead reinterprets them within contemporary pedagogical frameworks.

The novelty of this research lies in its theoretical contribution to reconceptualizing teacher authority within Islamic education as a negotiated process between pedagogical innovation and religious educational tradition. While existing studies on student-centered learning often focus on secular schooling contexts, this study demonstrates how madrasah teachers reinterpret professional authority through culturally and religiously embedded professional frameworks. The findings show that project-based learning can coexist with Islamic moral pedagogy when teacher authority is understood as ethical and intellectual guidance rather than hierarchical control. Consequently, the study contributes to global discussions on teacher professionalism by offering a culturally grounded model that integrates Islamic educational philosophy with contemporary pedagogical innovation. Such insights highlight the capacity of Islamic educational institutions to adapt constructively to global educational reforms while preserving their distinctive ethical and spiritual foundations.

The findings also carry important implications for Islamic education policy and future research. Educational policymakers should support teacher professional development programs that integrate innovative pedagogical approaches with Islamic ethical frameworks in order to strengthen both instructional quality and moral leadership in madrasah education. Policies should also encourage collaborative professional learning communities among madrasah teachers to facilitate pedagogical experimentation and reflective professional practice. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its focus on a specific institutional context and reliance on interview-based qualitative data, which may not fully capture the diversity of pedagogical practices across different madrasah systems. Future research should therefore expand the investigation through comparative and longitudinal studies involving diverse Islamic educational institutions and incorporating student perspectives on project-based learning. Such research would contribute to a deeper understanding of how Islamic education can engage with global educational change while maintaining its cultural and religious identity.

## **Declarations**

### **Author contribution statement**

Contributions of the authors in this article: First author, contributed as concepts and drafters of the article, data analyzers, interpreters, writing the manuscript and critically revising the article; Second author, as the critically revising the article, and editing of the language of manuscript. Third author, as the drafter of the manuscript, collecting data and critically revising the article. Fourth author, as the drafter of the manuscript, collecting data, writing the manuscript and critically revising the article. All authors agree to take responsibility for all aspects of this work. Both authors contributed equally and approved the final version of the article for publication.

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The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

### Declaration of use artificial intelligence

The author uses generative artificial intelligence in this paper for the data analysis process.

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