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Beyond Compliance: Accreditation Standards as a Catalyst for Educational Quality and SDG Integration in Muhammadiyah Junior High Schools

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Abstract

Objective: This study aims to examine the influence of accreditation standards on improving educational quality in Muhammadiyah junior high schools, focusing on how accreditation drives systemic change in Islamic secondary education, aligning with SDG Goal 4: Quality Education. **Theoretical framework:** Grounded in systemic change theory, this study explores how accreditation serves as a mechanism for quality improvement, integrating quality management and organizational development theories to assess its impact on governance, curriculum, and teacher development in line with the SDGs. **Literature review:** While accreditation is recognized for enhancing educational quality, its role in driving systemic change in Islamic secondary education remains underexplored. Previous research has primarily addressed its administrative role, with growing interest in its potential for curriculum reform, teacher development, and organizational improvements, in alignment with SDG Goal 4 for inclusive and equitable quality education. **Methods:** A mixed-methods approach was used, including a survey of 602 respondents from 6 Muhammadiyah junior high schools. The data were analyzed using PLS-SEM to assess the relationship between accreditation standards and educational quality, complemented by interviews and document analysis for deeper insights. **Results:** The study found a strong and statistically significant relationship between accreditation standards and educational quality (path coefficient = 0.697, p-value = 0.000). Improvements were noted in educational facilities, alignment with the school's vision, policy development, financial management, and teacher professional growth. These findings emphasize that accreditation is not just an administrative requirement but a key driver of systemic change and quality improvement. **Implications:** Accreditation can be leveraged as a strategic tool for educational reform, fostering continuous improvement in governance, curriculum, and teacher development. Policymakers and educators should utilize accreditation to align practices with SDG Goal 4, ensuring inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all. **Novelty:** This study contributes to the limited research on accreditation as a driver of systemic change in Islamic secondary education, presenting it as a strategic tool for fostering a culture of quality. The mixed-methods approach provides comprehensive insights into accreditation's impact on school development, advancing SDG Goal 4.

Keywords: accreditation, educational quality, standards, management, sdgs.

INTRODUCTION

Changes and developments in education impact the importance of every school providing a quality education for every child. Therefore, efforts are needed to improve school quality and efficiency. One of the solutions is to evaluate each school through accreditation. This is

crucial for making informed decisions regarding emerging issues [1]. Through the evaluation process, schools can identify strengths and areas for improvement, develop plans, prioritize actions, and make data-driven decisions [2].

Accreditation involves rigorous inspections to ensure schools meet established standards, thus qualifying them to teach students according to the programs offered [3]. However, many studies have highlighted the negative impact of accreditation on educational development [4]–[8]. In the Indonesian context, the National Accreditation Board for Schools/Madrasah (BAN-S/M) in 2023 showed that 95.38% of schools in Indonesia had been accredited, but only 33.4% had received an “A” rating. This situation indicates that although the accreditation process has been widely implemented, not all institutions have been able to optimize its results as a significant driver of quality improvement. Previous studies reveal that accreditation results are often treated merely as an administrative formality to obtain official recognition, so that their impact on curriculum changes, learning strategies, and educational governance is not optimal [9].

Research has shown that accreditation has been claimed by all accreditation bodies as a driver of growth [10]. This means that accreditation has made meeting minimum standards a prerequisite for educational transformation. However, the reality on the ground shows a gap between accreditation recommendations and the implementation of sustainable, innovative policies, including at Muhammadiyah Junior High School. Yet, as the largest Islamic educational organization in Indonesia, Muhammadiyah manages more than 23,000 schools and madrasahs. This shows that optimizing the role of accreditation has the potential to have a broad systemic impact, which is in line with the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially in Goal 4, which focuses on quality and inclusive education. By emphasizing equitable quality of education, accreditation can catalyze improving the quality of teaching and learning, as well as providing better access for all students, including those in remote or marginalized areas [11].

Previous research in Indonesia has tended to focus on evaluating accreditation implementation [12]–[15], or analyzing compliance with the National Standards of Education (SNP), while studies investigating the role of accreditation standards as a catalyst for systemic change in Islamic value-based madrasahs are still limited. Furthermore, research combining a mixed methods approach to comprehensively uncover the quantitative impact and qualitative meaning of accreditation remains rare, leaving ample scope for this research. By adding the SDGs dimension, specifically Goal 4, this study aims to bridge this gap and show how accreditation can play an important role in achieving the goals of quality and inclusive education, which in turn supports the development of a sustainable and future-oriented education system.

This study introduces a new perspective by positioning accreditation standards as strategic drivers of systemic educational transformation rather than as instruments of administrative compliance. It integrates accreditation, educational quality, and Sustainable Development Goals within the context of Muhammadiyah junior high schools, emphasizing how quality assurance supports institutional development, curriculum improvement, teacher professionalism, and governance. The mixed-methods approach also provides comprehensive evidence that combines quantitative relationships with qualitative insights, offering a holistic understanding of accreditation's contribution to sustainable educational reform [12]–[15].

The findings encourage policymakers, school leaders, and educational organizations to utilize accreditation outcomes as continuous improvement strategies that strengthen governance, instructional quality, and institutional sustainability. Aligning accreditation practices with SDG 4 and SDG 16 enables schools to promote inclusive education, accountable leadership, and long-term organizational resilience while fostering sustainable educational development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational accreditation has increasingly evolved from a mechanism of administrative evaluation into a strategic framework for promoting institutional excellence and sustainable educational improvement. Rather than functioning solely as an external quality assurance process, accreditation encourages schools to establish systematic governance, strengthen accountability, and foster a culture of continuous improvement. Through comprehensive standards covering leadership, curriculum, learning, assessment, human resources, and resource management, accreditation provides a structured pathway for schools to enhance organizational effectiveness and educational outcomes [\[11\]](#).

The concept of educational quality extends beyond students' academic achievement to include institutional capacity, teacher professionalism, inclusive learning environments, and effective school management. High-quality education requires coherent planning, transparent governance, collaborative leadership, and continuous evaluation to ensure that educational objectives are achieved. Accreditation contributes to these dimensions by encouraging schools to conduct self-assessment, identify institutional strengths and weaknesses, and implement evidence-based improvement strategies. Consequently, accreditation can be understood as a catalyst for organizational learning rather than merely a certification process [\[11\]](#).

In Islamic educational institutions, particularly Muhammadiyah junior high schools, accreditation assumes an even broader role because educational quality is expected to integrate academic excellence with Islamic values and character formation. School improvement therefore encompasses not only curriculum development and instructional innovation but also ethical leadership, community engagement, and value-based educational management. This holistic perspective supports sustainable institutional development while preserving the distinctive identity of Muhammadiyah education in responding to contemporary educational challenges [\[12\]–\[15\]](#).

The growing emphasis on sustainable development further expands the significance of accreditation. Sustainable Development Goal 4 highlights the importance of inclusive, equitable, and quality education that equips learners with relevant competencies for lifelong learning. Accreditation standards contribute to this objective by encouraging curriculum relevance, professional teacher development, equitable access to educational resources, and continuous quality enhancement. Furthermore, transparent governance, institutional accountability, and participatory decision-making promoted through accreditation also reflect the principles of Sustainable Development Goal 16, which emphasizes effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions [\[12\]–\[15\]](#).

Despite these potential contributions, accreditation is frequently perceived as a compliance-oriented exercise that focuses on documentation and periodic evaluation rather than long-term educational transformation. Such perceptions limit its strategic value and reduce opportunities for institutional innovation. Therefore, examining accreditation as a driver of systemic educational change provides an important perspective for understanding how quality assurance mechanisms can support sustainable school development, strengthen institutional resilience, and accelerate the achievement of educational quality aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals [\[16\]](#).

METHODOLOGY

This research is an explanatory sequential design, conducted through quantitative stages followed by qualitative ones. In the quantitative stage, a survey was conducted to determine the influence of accreditation and educational quality at Muhammadiyah Junior High Schools. The results of the quantitative stage were used as the basis for the qualitative stage, which aimed to delve deeper into the reconstruction of educational quality. The qualitative stage was conducted using a phenomenological design. Phenomenological design allows for deeper

insight, subjective introspection, and understanding of essence. Phenomenology focuses on the whole person as a crucial element of the research [16].

Sample

The quantitative phase was conducted by a survey of 602 participants. Researchers used the Slovin technique to determine the number of subjects in the quantitative phase. Details of the subjects involved in the survey are presented in Table 1. Meanwhile, the qualitative phase was conducted by involving 6 school principals (K1, K2, K3, and K4), 4 teachers (G1, G2, G3, and G4), and 8 students (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, and S8). Subjects were selected purposively according to their representativeness, research needs, and willingness to participate in the entire research process until the end.

Table 1. Quantitative Research Subjects

Responden	Frequency
School Management	97
Sstudents	347
Community	13
Parents	133
School Supervisor	12
Total	602

Instrument and Procedure

A questionnaire with five alternative answers was used in the survey phase. The questionnaire met validity criteria based on the assessment of three experts. It was also declared reliable using Cronbach's alpha. Each participant received a Google form and took 15 to 20 minutes to complete.

In the qualitative phase, the researcher used interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Interviews are key to collecting phenomenological research data to gain a clear and in-depth understanding of respondents' perceptions of the research [17]. The interview structure was developed using guidelines from Bevan [18], which include contextualization, appreciating the phenomenon, and clarifying the phenomenon. Key interview questions were evaluated by three experts and piloted on research subjects. Pilot testing was conducted to test the questions and provide practice in the interviews. Each participant was interviewed for 30 to 60 minutes in person. The entire interview process was audio-recorded by the researcher upon agreement with the participants [19].

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, and continued PLS-SEM analyzed. Interview data were analyzed qualitatively, adapting the analysis steps of, including: 1) rereading all participant descriptions of the phenomenon under study; 2) extracting significant statements from each descriptive statement that directly relate to the phenomenon; 3) formulating the meaning of important statements; 4) organizing them by formulating meaning into themes; 5) integrating the data analysis results into a description of the phenomenon under study; 6) returning the results to participants for validation; and 7) incorporating relevant new data into the fundamental structure of the phenomenon [20],[21].

To ensure the research was conducted effectively, the researcher ensured credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability. Credibility in the research was achieved through triangulation of data collection methods, namely questionnaires and interviews.

Confirmability and dependability in the research were achieved through continuous engagement with the data and data verification by all members of the research team. To ensure transferability, the researcher provided detailed explanations for each section of the research [22], [23].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on assessments by students, school management, the community, and supervisors indicate that accreditation has a significant impact on school quality. This impact is particularly significant in improving the quality of school management. The detailed impact of accreditation on school quality is shown in Figure 1.

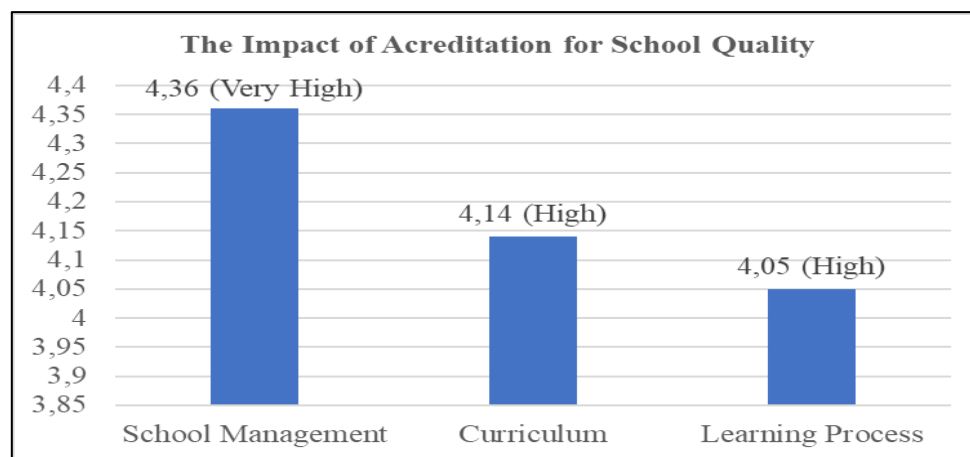


Figure 1. Impact of accreditation on school quality

The results of the path analysis (Figure 2) showed that the path coefficient between the accreditation process and the reconstruction of educational quality was 0.206. The T-statistic value of 4.879 with a p-value of 0.000 indicates that the effect is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. However, the F-square value of 0.062 indicates that the relative contribution of the accreditation process to the reconstruction of educational quality is in the small category. This finding implies that the accreditation process plays a significant role in encouraging improvements in educational quality, but its influence is relatively limited when compared to other factors involved. Meanwhile, the influence of accreditation standards on the reconstruction of educational quality has a path coefficient of 0.697, with a T-statistic value of 17.068 and a p-value of 0.000. These findings indicate a very strong and statistically significant relationship.

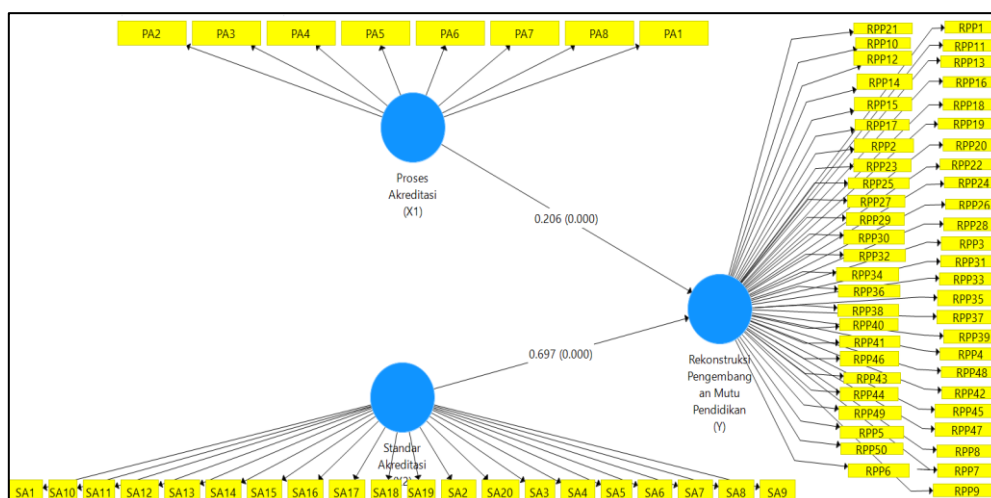


Figure 2. Path Analysis of the Influence of Accreditation on School Quality

In terms of curriculum, accreditation has prompted in-depth reflection on the suitability and relevance of the implemented curriculum. Evaluations of the KTSP (School-Based Curriculum) and the Merdeka Curriculum documents used indicate that schools have begun designing curricula that not only align with national standards but are also more contextual and responsive to the needs of students in rural areas [24],[25]. Accreditation results have encouraged madrasas to incorporate current issues such as religious moderation, character education, digital literacy, and 21st-century skills into curriculum planning. This accreditation is in line with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Goal 4, which emphasizes the importance of quality, inclusive, and equitable education. This includes efforts to ensure that all students, without exception, have access to relevant and quality education, as well as preparing them with the skills necessary to adapt to the challenges of the future [26],[27].

Accreditation also encourages the strengthening of linkages between learning planning and formative and summative assessments, which were previously not the main focus. This approach supports the SDGs by introducing more holistic, learning outcomes-based assessments that are more real and relevant to student development [28],[29].

In terms of learning, accreditation results emphasize improving the quality of the teaching and learning process, which positions students as active participants. Teachers in madrasas are beginning to be encouraged to move away from the one-way lecture method and adopt activity-based, collaborative, and problem-solving learning approaches [30],[31]. More interactive learning practices, such as inquiry-based learning, problem-solving, and multimedia integration, are becoming increasingly commonplace. This is demonstrated by classroom observation data and interviews with teachers, who acknowledged that they are more motivated to design innovative learning because of the demands of accreditation. These findings align with previous research by Healey and Okulova & Shakina [32],[33], which emphasized the positive role of accreditation in driving school improvement and enhancing educational quality. However, there is a gap between the spirit of innovation and the availability of learning resources, particularly in madrasas with limited technology and teacher training. This is related to Goal 4 of the SDGs, which emphasizes the importance of capacity building and more inclusive teaching by addressing gaps in access to educational technology [34],[35].

Meanwhile, in school management, accreditation results serve as a crucial driver for improving organizational structures, academic supervision systems, and internal communication patterns. School principals use accreditation results as a basis for formulating work programs, evaluating teacher and educational staff performance, and developing a collaborative work culture [36],[37]. Aspects of data-driven decision-making are beginning to be internalized within the madrasah management cycle. However, not all madrasas have the strong leadership capacity to translate accreditation results into measurable and sustainable institutional development strategies. This finding addresses the challenges of previous research by using accreditation as a catalyst for schools to utilize their creative resources for school development. This is in line with SDGs Goal 16, which focuses on building effective, transparent, and inclusive institutions at all levels of education [38],[39].

Thus, accreditation outcomes make a significant contribution to strengthening educational quality, but their impact varies greatly depending on the extent to which madrasas can utilize them as a source of strategic reflection, rather than simply administrative compliance. Factors such as leadership capacity, supervisory support, and organizational culture are important determinants of the effectiveness of post-accreditation follow-up [40],[41]. Overall, the achievement of SDGs 4 can be further maximized if the accreditation process is implemented more systematically and is responsive to the needs of sustainable education.

The findings demonstrate that accreditation standards function as strategic instruments for improving educational quality beyond administrative compliance. Schools that consistently implement accreditation recommendations tend to develop stronger governance systems, more responsive curricula, and improved instructional practices. These improvements indicate

that accreditation encourages organizational learning by promoting systematic planning, evidence-based decision-making, and continuous quality evaluation. Consequently, accreditation becomes an internal mechanism for sustainable institutional development rather than a periodic external assessment. The results also suggest that leadership commitment plays a decisive role in translating accreditation outcomes into meaningful educational improvements. Effective school leaders utilize accreditation findings to strengthen teacher professional development, optimize resource management, and encourage collaborative school cultures. Such practices increase institutional adaptability and reinforce long-term educational performance.

Within Muhammadiyah junior high schools, accreditation further supports the integration of Islamic values with modern educational management. This balance enables schools to maintain their religious identity while responding to evolving educational demands, including digital learning, student-centered instruction, and competency-based curriculum implementation. The combination of academic quality and ethical education contributes to holistic student development. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that accreditation supports the realization of Sustainable Development Goal 4 by fostering inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education through continuous institutional improvement. Simultaneously, transparent governance, accountability, and participatory management promoted through accreditation align with Sustainable Development Goal 16 by strengthening effective and resilient educational institutions capable of sustaining quality improvement over time.

CONCLUSION

The results indicate that accreditation plays a significant role in improving educational quality, particularly in school management. Accreditation standards have shown a very strong influence on the reconstruction of educational quality, while the accreditation process itself contributes significantly, albeit relatively modestly. This impact is evident in the development of a more contextual curriculum, more innovative and participatory learning methods, and more structured, data-driven institutional management. These improvements align with SDGs 4: Quality Education, emphasizing the importance of inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all. Based on these findings, it is recommended that accreditation outcomes not be seen as mere administrative fulfillment, but rather be integrated into sustainable development programs. Strengthening school leadership capacity, providing resources for innovative learning, and increasing supervisory oversight and support are critical to the success of accreditation. These measures are essential to advancing the goals of SDGs 4, ensuring continuous improvement and adaptation to evolving educational needs. Further research using a longitudinal approach is necessary to more comprehensively assess the long-term impact of accreditation on educational quality. Additionally, future studies should consider variations in school capacity as an important variable, as the ability of schools to implement accreditation results is significantly influenced by resource availability. Differences in access to learning technologies, the intensity of teacher training programs, and the quality of school leadership may serve as moderating factors explaining variations in the effectiveness of accreditation in improving educational quality. These factors are closely linked to SDG Goal 4, which advocates for equal access to quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. Therefore, future research should develop a more comprehensive analysis model by considering school capacity dimensions, using both quantitative methods to test statistical influences and qualitative approaches to explore the dynamics of implementation in the field. This will help better understand how accreditation can contribute to achieving SDG Goal 4, ensuring that educational quality improvements are sustainable, inclusive, and equitable.

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Author Contribution

All authors equally contributed to conceptualization, methodology, data collection, analysis, manuscript preparation, revision, and approval of the final published version together.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no financial, professional, or personal conflicts of interest that could influence this research or publication.

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