

The Philosophy of Pesantren Education: A Study on the Foundations of Innovation in Pesantren Development

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the philosophy of pesantren education as the philosophical foundation for innovation in the development of Islamic boarding schools amid the dynamics of social change and the demands of modernity. The study is grounded in the assumption that pesantren innovation is not merely technical or pragmatic in nature, but is deeply rooted in the ontological, epistemological, and axiological constructions of pesantren education. Employing a qualitative approach with a multi-site case study design, the research was conducted at Mahirul Hikam Assalafi Islamic Boarding School in Semarang Regency and Nurul Qur'an Islamic Boarding School in Boyolali. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, and subsequently analyzed using an interactive analysis model. The findings reveal that ontologically, pesantren education is based on a conception of human beings as religious and social entities; epistemologically, it relies on the selective integration of revelation, classical Islamic scholarly traditions, and modern rationality; and axiologically, it is oriented toward moral formation, communal well-being, and social responsibility. These philosophical foundations serve as the primary basis for pesantren innovation, encompassing institutional development, curriculum design, and educational programs. The innovations implemented by both pesantren are contextual and gradual in nature, aimed at preserving the tradition of *tafaquh fi al-din* while enhancing the relevance of pesantren education to contemporary societal needs. This study underscores that the philosophy of pesantren education plays a strategic role in bridging tradition and modernity, and functions as a normative framework for adaptive and sustainable pesantren development.

Keywords: *Pesantren, Philosophy, Islamic Education, Educational Innovation*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan mengkaji falsafah pendidikan pesantren sebagai landasan filosofis inovasi pengembangan pondok pesantren di tengah dinamika perubahan sosial dan tuntutan modernitas. Kajian ini berangkat dari asumsi bahwa inovasi pesantren tidak bersifat teknis-pragmatis semata, melainkan berakar pada konstruksi ontologis, epistemologis, dan aksiologis pendidikan pesantren. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus multi-situs yang dilakukan di Pondok Pesantren Mahirul Hikam Assalafi Kabupaten Semarang dan Pondok Pesantren Nurul

Qur'an Boyolali. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara mendalam, dan studi dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis dengan model analisis interaktif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa secara ontologis pendidikan pesantren berpijak pada pandangan tentang manusia sebagai makhluk religius dan sosial; secara epistemologis mengandalkan integrasi wahyu, tradisi keilmuan klasik, dan rasionalitas modern secara selektif; serta secara aksiologis berorientasi pada pembentukan akhlak, kemaslahatan umat, dan tanggung jawab sosial. Landasan filosofis tersebut menjadi pijakan utama dalam pengembangan inovasi pesantren, baik dalam aspek kelembagaan, kurikulum, maupun program pendidikan. Inovasi yang dilakukan oleh kedua pesantren bersifat kontekstual dan bertahap, bertujuan menjaga keberlanjutan tradisi *tafaqquh fi al-din* sekaligus meningkatkan relevansi pendidikan pesantren dengan kebutuhan masyarakat kontemporer. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa falsafah pendidikan pesantren berperan strategis dalam menjembatani tradisi dan modernitas, serta menjadi kerangka normatif bagi pengembangan pesantren yang adaptif dan berkelanjutan.

Kata Kunci: *Pesantren, Filsafat, Pendidikan Islam, Inovasi Pendidikan*

INTRODUCTION

Pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) are among the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia and play a strategic role in shaping the character, moral values, and intellectual development of the Muslim community (Dhofier, 1980). Since their early emergence, pesantren have functioned not only as centers for the transmission of Islamic knowledge, but also as institutions that instill values of faith (*īmān*), piety (*taqwā*), and noble character (*akhlāq al-karīmah*) among students through a distinctive educational system rooted in Islamic tradition. This distinctiveness is reflected in the relational pattern between *kyai* and *santri*, the teaching of classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*), and the internalization of spiritual and social values in the daily life of the pesantren (Azizah et al., 2023; Van Bruinessen, 1994).

Nevertheless, social dynamics, technological developments, and the forces of globalization have posed new challenges to the sustainability of pesantren. Pesantren are required to remain relevant to contemporary demands without losing their traditional identity and distinctive character (Sofi et al., 2025). The integration of traditional educational systems such as the teaching of *kitab kuning* and *diniyah* education with modern educational systems, including alignment with the national curriculum and the strengthening of students' skill competencies, has become one of the pesantren's responses to these changes. This condition places pesantren in a dilemmatic position: between preserving the

continuity of the *salaf* tradition and responding to the demands for educational innovation.

State recognition of the strategic role of pesantren is formally affirmed through Law Number 18 of 2019 on Islamic Boarding Schools, which stipulates that pesantren function not only as religious educational institutions but also as centers of da'wah and community empowerment. This recognition implicitly requires pesantren to develop educational systems that are adaptive, contextual, and sustainable. Therefore, innovation in pesantren development is not merely a pragmatic option, but rather a structural necessity that must be grounded in the values and philosophy of pesantren education itself.

A number of studies have examined innovation and reform in pesantren from various perspectives. (Muiz et al., 2021) and (Hasan, 2015), for instance, highlight pesantren innovations in learning methods, curricular content, and institutional management. Meanwhile, (Pramitha, 2020) as well as (Rikza & Masyhari, 2016) emphasize the central role of the *kyai* as a key actor in the process of educational innovation and pesantren development. (Harmathilda et al., 2024) offer a more comprehensive contribution by elucidating the dynamics of pesantren educational transformation in maintaining traditional identity while simultaneously adopting innovations that are responsive to contemporary demands.

On the other hand, studies on the philosophy of pesantren education have also been widely conducted. (Aziz et al., 2023) discuss the philosophical frameworks underpinning educational practices in Indonesian pesantren; (Wajdi, 2022) analyzes the development of Islamic educational philosophy within the pesantren context; and (Usiono, 2023) examines the concept of modern pesantren from the perspective of Islamic educational philosophy. These studies provide important contributions to understanding the philosophical foundations of pesantren education from ontological, epistemological, and axiological perspectives.

However, existing studies generally position innovation in pesantren development and the philosophy of pesantren education as two separate domains, with limited elaboration on the philosophical foundations that underpin such innovations. Publications that specifically explore the philosophical basis of innovation in pesantren development particularly within *salaf* pesantren that engage in institutional and programmatic innovation remain

relatively limited. In fact, innovation in pesantren cannot be detached from the educational philosophy that serves as the primary reference in determining the direction, form, and boundaries of change.

Based on this research gap, this article aims to examine the philosophy of pesantren education as the philosophical foundation for innovation in pesantren development, encompassing value orientations, forms of innovation, and their relevance to contemporary developments. To obtain a contextual and empirical understanding, this study focuses on Mahirul Hikam Assalafi Islamic Boarding School in Payudan Susukan, Semarang Regency, and Nurul Qur'an Islamic Boarding School in Simo, Boyolali, Central Java. The selection of these two pesantren is based on their characteristics as *salaf* pesantren that continue to preserve the tradition of *kitab kuning* instruction and *diniyah* education, while simultaneously developing various formal and non-formal educational programs, such as *tahfidz al-Qur'an*, formal madrasah education (MTs, SMA/SMK), and programs for skills enhancement and student empowerment. With these characteristics, both pesantren serve as representative sites for examining how the philosophy of pesantren education functions as the foundation for formulating and implementing development innovations amid the challenges of modernity. Specifically, this article addresses the following questions: How is the philosophy of pesantren education constructed from ontological, epistemological, and axiological perspectives within the context of Islamic education? What forms of innovation are developed by pesantren in the domains of institutional management, curriculum, and educational programs, and how are these innovations aligned with contemporary societal needs?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a multi-site case study design. The research was conducted at Mahirul Hikam Assalafi Islamic Boarding School in Payudan Susukan, Semarang Regency, and Nurul Qur'an Islamic Boarding School in Boyolali, Central Java. The focus of the study is to examine the philosophical foundations underlying innovation in pesantren development, as well as the forms of innovation implemented.

The research data consist of both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through field observations and in-depth interviews with purposively selected key informants, including pesantren caregivers (*kyai*),

administrators, teachers (*ustadz*), and senior students. Secondary data were collected through document analysis, such as pesantren vision and mission statements, curricula, activity archives, as well as relevant scholarly articles and academic journals. Data collection was carried out through observation, interviews, and document review. Data analysis followed Creswell's interactive analysis model, which involved several stages: data organization, comprehensive reading of the data, coding, grouping codes into major themes, and interpreting the meaning of these themes within the framework of Islamic educational philosophy (Creswell, 2021). Data validity was ensured through source and method triangulation by comparing data obtained from interviews, observations, and documents, as well as through cross-site comparison of findings to achieve more comprehensive and robust conclusions (Sugiyono, 2010).

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Construction of the Philosophy of Pesantren Education

To initiate the discussion on the construction of the philosophy of pesantren education in this section, the perspective of the structure of knowledge is employed as a theoretical framework for understanding the development of Islamic educational philosophy, which remains an ongoing discourse among scholars. This framework is essential because Islamic educational philosophy does not stand independently; rather, it should function as the conceptual foundation for the implementation of education in Islamic educational institutions, particularly pesantren. In other words, pesantren educational practices constitute manifestations of the philosophical worldview embraced by the institution.

This study specifically elaborates Van Peursen's theory of the structure of knowledge to trace the relationship between philosophy, science, and educational practice. Scholars of educational philosophy have emphasized that every field of knowledge, including education, can ultimately be traced back to its philosophical roots (Peursen, 1985). In this context, education is understood as the "offspring" of educational philosophy, while educational philosophy itself derives from general philosophy. This hierarchical pattern also applies to Islamic education, wherein Islamic education is rooted in the philosophy of Islamic education, and the philosophy of Islamic education is derived from Islamic philosophy (Mahjub, 1987).

Philosophy is often referred to as the mother of all sciences, as various disciplines emerge from it in accordance with their respective material objects. Conversely, from the applied sciences, universal ideas that constitute the objects of philosophical inquiry can be traced back. This reciprocal relationship forms a hierarchical structure of knowledge, commonly analogized as a “tree of knowledge,” with philosophy as the roots, sciences as the trunk and branches, and technology and practice as the fruits (Mudhafir, 2010).

Based on this framework, pesantren education cannot be understood merely as a pedagogical practice, but rather as a philosophical construct that reflects ontological views on the nature of human beings and education, epistemological perspectives on the sources and modes of acquiring knowledge, and axiological orientations concerning the aims and values of education.

Within the context of Islamic education, M. Jawwad Ridla has classified three major paradigms of Islamic educational thought: Religious–Conservative, Religious–Rational, and Pragmatic–Instrumental. These three paradigms differ in their understanding of the relationship between human beings and God, as well as in their views on the position and function of knowledge, although they also share certain common elements (Ridla, 2002). Conceptually, the distinctions among these paradigms can be illustrated in the following table:

Table 1: Typology of Islamic Educational Thought according to Jawwad Ridlo

Paradigm	Ontology	Epistemology	Axiology
Religious–Conservative	Fixed, transcendent reality	Revelation and tradition	Preservation of values
Religious–Rational	Dynamic reality	Revelation, reason, and experience	<i>Insān kāmil</i>
Pragmatic–Instrumental	Contextual reality	Empirical and functional	Social reconstruction

Therefore, the following discussion is directed toward examining the construction of the philosophy of pesantren education through the three principal dimensions of philosophy: ontology, epistemology, and axiology as the foundation for innovation and the development of pesantren in the contemporary era, while simultaneously integrating the classification of Islamic educational thought proposed by M. Jawwad Ridla.

Ontology of Pesantren Education: A Philosophical Foundation between Tradition and Change

Ontologically, pesantren education is grounded in a conception of human beings as creatures of Allah SWT who possess physical, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions. Human beings are understood not only as *homo educandum*—beings in need of education—but also as *'abdullāh* (servants of God) and *khalīfatullāh* (vicegerents of God) who bear both spiritual and social responsibilities (Hidayat & Nasution, 2016; Syar'i, 2020). This ontological perspective positions pesantren education not merely as a process of knowledge transmission, but as an endeavor aimed at the formation of the complete human being (*insān kāmil*) who embodies faith, knowledge, and moral integrity.

This ontological view aligns with the typology of Islamic educational philosophy proposed by M. Jawwad Ridla. According to him, the Religious–Conservative paradigm views educational reality as a divinely ordained order that is normative, stable, and must be preserved through education (Ridla, 2002). Within this framework, *salaf* pesantren perceive human reality and knowledge as integral parts of a theocentric value system that is not value-neutral.

In the context of *salaf* pesantren, the essence of knowledge (*al-'ilm*) is understood as deriving from revelation and reason guided by divine values. Knowledge is not considered neutral; rather, it contains moral and spiritual dimensions that must be embodied in practice (Haryanto, 2022; Prastowo et al., 2023). This perspective is consistent with Jawwad Ridla's view that within the Religious–Conservative paradigm, knowledge is positioned as a means of devotion to Allah rather than merely as an instrument for worldly mastery (Ridla, 2002; Sumadi, 2019).

Accordingly, pesantren education situates knowledge as a means of drawing closer to Allah and fostering the welfare of the Muslim community. Such an ontology of knowledge gives pesantren a distinctive educational orientation, differentiating it from secular modern education, which tends to emphasize utilitarian and pragmatic dimensions. Indicatively, this perspective resonates with a statement from one of the informants:

"In pesantren, the primary goal is not merely for students to be intellectually capable, but for them to understand adab and the ethical responsibility of knowledge in life. Knowledge, therefore, serves to strengthen faith and moral character."

Amid social transformation and technological advancement, the ontological foundations of pesantren education face new challenges, particularly in relation to demands for relevance and adaptability. However, these changes do not necessarily displace the ontological foundations of pesantren. Rather, innovation in pesantren development is understood as part of a conscious effort (*ikhtiyār*) to sustain the core values of pesantren within an ever-changing historical context. From the perspective of the Religious–Rational paradigm, reality is viewed as something that can be comprehended through the integration of revelation and reason, allowing for renewal (*tajdīd*) insofar as it does not contradict fundamental Islamic values (Ridla, 2002; Sahed et al., 2018). In this sense, the innovations and adaptive strategies undertaken by Nurul Qur’an and Mahirul Hikam Assalafi pesantren can be understood as forms of *tajdīd* that remain firmly rooted in Islamic ontological perspectives.

On the basis of this ontological foundation, pesantren are well positioned to develop various forms of educational innovation in institutional structures, curricula, and student development programs without losing their identity as tradition-based Islamic educational institutions. It is this ontology of pesantren education that constitutes the principal philosophical foundation for determining the direction, boundaries, and orientation of innovation in pesantren development in the modern era.

Epistemology of Pesantren Education as the Basis for Scholarly Innovation

The epistemology of pesantren education is grounded in perspectives on the sources, modes of acquisition, and legitimacy of knowledge within the Islamic scholarly tradition (Sumadi, 2018). In the context of *salaf* pesantren, the primary sources of knowledge are the Qur’an and the Sunnah, which are subsequently understood and developed through the classical Islamic scholarly tradition (*turāth*) transmitted by generations of *ulama* (Interview 1). The *kitab kuning* serve as the principal medium for the transmission of knowledge, as well as a symbol of the continuity of scholarly lineage (*sanad*), which safeguards the authority and validity of knowledge.

This epistemological construction corresponds to the characteristics of the Religious–Conservative paradigm in Jawwad Ridla’s typology, which emphasizes revelation and the authority of *ulama* as the primary sources of knowledge, while reason functions in a subordinate and normative capacity

(Ridla, 2002). Within this framework, the legitimacy of knowledge is not determined solely by novelty or utility, but by its connection to an authenticated scholarly lineage.

Epistemological processes in pesantren education do not merely emphasize textual mastery, but also underscore the scholarly authority of the *kyai* as the custodian and mediator of the chain of knowledge transmission (Al-Ghifari et al., 2024; Isbah, 2020). Learning methods such as *bandongan*, *sorogan*, and *halaqah* represent distinctive pesantren approaches to cultivating scholarly understanding that is gradual, profound, and grounded in *adab* (Van Bruinessen, 1994; Yusuf & Ali, 2025). Within this framework, knowledge is acquired not merely through individual rationality, but through a process of guided formation (*ta'dīb*) that integrates knowledge, disposition, and scholarly ethics.

Nevertheless, social dynamics and developments in science and knowledge demand that pesantren expand their epistemological horizons. The development of formal education, the strengthening of scientific and technological literacy, and the integration of the national curriculum represent pesantren responses to these demands (Hanif et al., 2024; Ni'am & Arafah, 2024; Ramadhan et al., 2024). This epistemological expansion does not replace the pesantren's scholarly tradition; rather, it enriches the ways in which pesantren produce and transmit knowledge. Accordingly, pesantren epistemology is inclusive and adaptive, without relinquishing its primary reference to Islamic values.

Jawwad Ridla also identifies another epistemological tendency within the Islamic educational tradition, namely the Religious–Rational paradigm, which opens space for reason and empirical experience as legitimate sources of knowledge, provided that they operate within the framework of revelatory values (Ridla, 2002; Sahed et al., 2018). This tendency can serve as a foundation for pesantren efforts to develop formal education, enhance scientific literacy, and integrate the national curriculum. Such an epistemological orientation is reflected in a *kyai*'s statement:

"Kitab kuning remain the foundation, but students also need to understand general sciences and technology. As long as the knowledge brings benefit and does not undermine pesantren values, it can be developed."

Within the framework of pesantren development innovation, educational epistemology functions as a selective basis for accepting and processing new

knowledge. Pesantren do not adopt innovations a priori; rather, they undergo a filtering process based on value compatibility, educational objectives, and the welfare (*maṣlahah*) of the community. This pattern indicates that innovation in pesantren is not technocratic in nature, but is rooted in careful epistemological considerations.

Thus, the epistemology of pesantren education not only plays a role in preserving the continuity of the Islamic scholarly tradition, but also serves as a philosophical foundation for the development of contextual and sustainable educational innovation. It is this epistemological foundation that enables pesantren to remain centers of Islamic scholarly authority while simultaneously acting as active agents in addressing educational challenges in the modern era.

Axiology of Pesantren Education: The Ethics of Innovation and Social Relevance

Axiologically, pesantren education is oriented toward the internalization of Islamic values that emphasize both individual piety and social responsibility. The core values that underpin pesantren education include sincerity (*ikhhlās*), *adab* (ethical conduct), religious obedience, and a commitment to communal welfare (*maṣlahah*). From this perspective, educational success is not measured solely by cognitive achievement or technical skills, but by the extent to which education shapes students' moral character and their active engagement in social life (Interview 2).

The axiology of pesantren education is also reflected in its educational objectives, namely the formation of individuals who possess knowledge and actualize it through practice. Within the pesantren tradition, knowledge acquires value only when it is embodied in conduct and manifested through tangible contributions to society (Interview 3). Consequently, pesantren education consistently links the learning process with the cultivation of a simple lifestyle, self-reliance, and service. These values serve as the ethical foundation that guides pesantren in determining the direction and boundaries of educational innovation.

From Jawwad Ridla's perspective, this value orientation represents a point of convergence between the Religious–Rational and Pragmatic paradigms. The Religious–Rational paradigm emphasizes a balance between spiritual values and rationality, while the Pragmatic paradigm highlights the social function and utility of education (Ridla, 2002). In practice, pesantren integrate these two orientations contextually.

In the pesantren tradition, knowledge attains significance when it is realized through action and social service. This view aligns with Jawwad Ridla's argument that within the Pragmatic paradigm, Islamic education should prepare individuals to actively participate in social and economic life without relinquishing Islamic values as their ethical foundation (Ridla, 2002).

In the context of pesantren development innovation, the axiological dimension functions as a moral compass that ensures that change and renewal do not deviate from the core values of pesantren (Arpanudin, 2016). The development of formal educational programs, skills training, and the utilization of educational technology are assessed not merely in terms of effectiveness or efficiency, but in relation to their alignment with the goals of moral formation and social well-being (Wanayati et al., 2025). Thus, innovation is positioned as a means to strengthen the educational function of pesantren rather than as an end in itself.

Furthermore, the axiology of pesantren education underscores the social relevance of pesantren within society. Pesantren function not only as educational institutions but also as centers of *da'wah*, empowerment, and the reinforcement of Islamic values in the community (Listrianti & Mundiri, 2020). Innovations developed by pesantren in the educational, economic, and social spheres reflect their commitment to sustaining their social roles (Khoirurrijal et al., 2023). This demonstrates that the axiology of pesantren education is dynamic, contextual, and responsive to the needs of the Muslim community.

This value orientation is reflected in the perspective of a pesantren *kyai*, who stated: "If students leave the pesantren and show no concern for the community, then their knowledge has no real benefit." For students as well, pesantren innovation is understood as a means of strengthening character and social readiness, rather than merely adding new facilities or programs: "The presence of formal schools and training programs in the pesantren makes us better prepared to engage with society, while still carrying the *adab* of the pesantren."

Accordingly, the axiology of pesantren education constitutes a philosophical foundation affirming that innovation in pesantren development must be oriented toward values, ethics, and communal welfare. It is this axiological dimension that enables pesantren to remain relevant in the face of

contemporary developments while remaining consistent with their identity as Islamic educational institutions rooted in tradition and noble values.

Forms of Innovation in Pesantren Education

Institutional Development Innovation

In addition to being grounded in the ontological, epistemological, and axiological perspectives of pesantren education, as discussed in the preceding sections, pesantren are understood as Islamic educational institutions rooted in the tradition of *tafaqquh fi al-dīn*, transmitting knowledge through established scholarly lineages (*sanad*), and oriented toward the formation of individuals who are faithful, morally upright, and socially contributive. Based on this philosophical foundation, the development of educational programs in pesantren cannot be detached from both their historical origins and the demands of ongoing social change. The principle of *al-muḥāfaẓah ‘alā al-qadīm al-ṣāliḥ wa al-akhḍhu bi al-jadīd al-aṣlah* preserving the sound traditions of the past while adopting more beneficial new elements serves as a normative basis for the transformation of pesantren education.

Based on interviews with Gus Manan (kyai of Nurul Qur’an Pesantren), this principle is what enables pesantren to maintain the continuity of the Islamic scholarly tradition while simultaneously adopting innovations that are relevant to contemporary needs. This pattern is clearly evident in the development of educational programs at Nurul Qur’an Pesantren and Mahirul Hikam Assalafi Pesantren.

Referring to Minhaji’s perspective, transformation in pesantren education is a process that can generate innovations in institutional structures, curricula, and educational programs. However, the form and pattern of such innovations are highly dependent on the characteristics of each pesantren. In this context, both pesantren have developed formal education, albeit with differing models and emphases (Minhaji, 2014).

Nurul Qur’an Pesantren integrates *salaf* education centered on Qur’anic studies with formal education ranging from early childhood education (RA) to Madrasah Aliyah (MA), as well as non-formal education such as TPQ and *Madrasah Diniyah*. Meanwhile, Mahirul Hikam Assalafi Pesantren has developed Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs), senior high schools (SMA), vocational schools (SMK), and vocational and job-training programs through collaboration with external partners.

Typologically, these development patterns indicate a tendency toward an integrative pesantren model, as classified by (Dhofier, 1980) and (Mastuhu, 1999), pesantren that preserve the tradition of classical Islamic texts while simultaneously accommodating general education and skills training. The innovations undertaken by both pesantren are also aligned with state policy, particularly Law Number 18 of 2019 on Pesantren, which recognizes three forms of pesantren educational provision: the study of *kitab kuning*, Islamic education based on the *mu'allimīn* model, and pesantren education integrated with general education.

Accordingly, curriculum innovations at MA Nurul Qur'an as well as at SMA and SMK Mahirul Hikam Assalafi not only reflect responses to contemporary demands, but also demonstrate pesantren's strategic efforts to preserve their Islamic identity while strengthening their social role within contemporary society.

Curriculum Innovation as an Adaptive Strategy in Pesantren Education

In addition to innovation in the institutional domain, pesantren have also undertaken significant reforms in the curricular domain as a response to the demands of social change. In the context of contemporary education, educational institutions are required not only to produce graduates with religious competence, but also to equip them with skills and competitiveness that enable productive participation in social life and the labor market (Muslich, 2018). From a pragmatic perspective, educational institutions that fail to respond to labor market demands are often perceived as lacking adaptability (Nuryatno, 2014).

Although such views may be debated from an idealist-critical standpoint, in practice they reflect the realities of modern societies operating within a highly competitive global environment (Putra, 2016). Accordingly, pesantren including pesantren-based madrasahs are expected to prepare students with relevant knowledge and skills without losing their identity as institutions dedicated to *tafaqquh fi al-dīn*.

MA Nurul Qur'an, for example, as a Madrasah Aliyah that has grown and developed within a pesantren environment, bears the responsibility of preparing graduates in accordance with the Indonesian National Qualifications Framework (KKNI), which emphasizes mastery of basic skills, operational knowledge, and professional responsibility (Sutrisno & Suyadi, 2016). Consequently, aligning the madrasah curriculum with the future needs of

students becomes imperative, as mandated by Presidential Regulation No. 8 of 2012 concerning the KKNl.

Nevertheless, the madrasah administration recognizes that exclusive reliance on the national curriculum framework carries the risk of eroding pesantren identity. Therefore, while MA Nurul Qur'an adheres to the Ministry of Religious Affairs curriculum, it strategically modifies the curriculum based on pesantren values and traditions as a form of educational innovation (Interview 1). Curriculum innovation at MA Nurul Qur'an is implemented through the strengthening of pesantren-based local content, particularly in Islamic studies subjects. In addition to standard materials, Arabic language instruction includes the study of *Imrithi*, fiqh courses are supplemented with *Fath al-Qarib*, and hadith studies employ *Bulugh al-Marām*, with a staged mastery target over the three-year period of study. This approach is intended to deepen students' Islamic understanding while preserving the continuity of scholarly lineage (*sanad*), a defining characteristic of pesantren aligned with *ahl al-sunnah wa al-jamā'ah* (Interview 3).

These modifications demonstrate that curriculum innovation does not necessarily entail wholesale replacement, but can take the form of deepening and contextualizing content to better align with the educational vision of the pesantren. Administratively, teachers continue to design instructional plans in accordance with Ministry of Religious Affairs standards; substantively, however, the learning process is directed toward reinforcing pesantren scholarly traditions.

Beyond strengthening religious education, curriculum innovation is also evident in the enhancement of foreign language competencies. Several subjects have been modified to include Japanese and Mandarin in place of Javanese language instruction, based on strategic considerations aimed at expanding access to scholarships and opportunities for further study at the global level. English and Arabic proficiency is also reinforced through supplementary programs outside formal class hours, including intensive training employing pesantren-specific pedagogical methods.

Curriculum innovation at MA Nurul Qur'an as well as at SMA and SMK Mahirul Hikam Assalafi reflects a conscious effort to integrate two value orientations often perceived as oppositional: educational pragmatism and idealism. On the one hand, education is expected to produce graduates who are prepared for the labor market and global competition; on the other hand,

pesantren-based madrasahs must avoid being wholly absorbed by market logic that risks reducing education to a mere economic investment.

Through the integration of the government curriculum with the *madrasah diniyah* curriculum, MA Nurul Qur'an seeks to maintain a balance between mastery of general knowledge and the deepening of religious sciences. The formulation of three graduate profiles *kyai* (religious scholars), *priyayi* (professionals), and entrepreneurs constitutes a concrete expression of an integrative and visionary curricular strategy (Sumadi, 2022). These profiles reflect not only pragmatic considerations, but also pesantren's commitment to producing a generation rooted in Islamic values while remaining adaptive to the demands of the times.

Thus, curriculum innovation at MA Nurul Qur'an and at SMA and SMK Mahirul Hikam Assalafi can be understood as an integral component of broader pesantren educational innovation. The curriculum functions not merely as an academic instrument, but as a strategic tool for preserving pesantren identity, strengthening graduates' competitiveness, and ensuring the relevance of pesantren education amid the dynamics of modern society, in accordance with the ontological, epistemological, and axiological foundations of pesantren education.

The Relevance of Pesantren Development Innovation in Responding to Contemporary Challenges

To understand the relevance of innovation in the development of pesantren educational programs, it is first necessary to establish a fundamental understanding of the nature of pesantren as Islamic educational institutions. Pesantren are distinctive Islamic educational institutions characterized by a boarding system (*pondok*), the central role of the *kyai*, the mosque as the focal point of activities, and an Islamic scholarly tradition rooted in classical texts (*kitab kuning*) (Dhofier, 1980; Sofi et al., 2025). Law Number 18 of 2019 on Pesantren affirms that pesantren education constitutes Islamic education conducted within the pesantren environment by developing curricula in accordance with pesantren's distinctive characteristics, either through the study of *kitab kuning* or *dirāsah islāmiyyah* using the *mu'allimin* educational model (Afifuddin et al., 2023; Syahputra et al., 2023).

Historically, the emergence of pesantren in Indonesia cannot be separated from the early process of Islamization in the archipelago. In their formative

period, pesantren functioned not only as institutions of religious education and instruction, but also as centers of da'wah and Islamic community development (Purnamasari, N. I., 2016). Along with social change and the evolving demands of the times, pesantren have undergone dynamic processes of adaptation and transformation, particularly in relation to the educational programs they offer.

The relevance of innovation in pesantren education to contemporary developments fundamentally remains anchored in the original objectives of pesantren formation. The Pesantren Law stipulates that the objectives of pesantren education include forming individuals who are faithful, pious, morally upright, independent, moderate, and academically competent; fostering moderate religious understanding and love for the homeland; and improving community quality of life through educational and social empowerment roles. In this regard, pesantren innovation should not be understood as a deviation from its foundational mission, but rather as a strategic effort to realize these objectives within an ever-changing social context.

In practice, not all families who send their children to pesantren expect them to become scholars or religious leaders. Some graduates choose to work in non-religious sectors without possessing adequate practical skills after completing their pesantren education. This condition creates opportunities for pesantren to develop skills-based educational programs as part of their educational transformation, enabling them to contribute more broadly to rural and regional community development (Minhaji, 2014).

Research findings indicate that the two pesantren examined in this study Pondok Pesantren Mahirul Hikam Assalafi and Pondok Pesantren Nurul Qur'an have responded to these challenges by developing formal education and vocational skills programs, albeit through different approaches. Pondok Pesantren Mahirul Hikam Assalafi emphasizes vocational education through the establishment of vocational high schools (SMK) and job training centers tailored to the needs of the surrounding community. Meanwhile, Pondok Pesantren Nurul Qur'an places greater emphasis on strengthening tiered formal education integrated with vocational training programs. These differences reflect the contextual adaptation of pesantren innovation to geographical, social, and community-specific needs.

Despite their expansion into formal education and skills training, both pesantren have maintained their traditional role as institutions of *tafaqquh fi al-*

din. On the contrary, the innovations implemented have enriched the educational landscape of pesantren while preserving the study of *kitab kuning* and classical Islamic scholarly traditions. This approach demonstrates that pesantren modernization is not equated with educational secularization, but rather with the expansion of pesantren's educational and social services to the broader community (Purnamasari, N. I., 2016).

Based on observed patterns of educational program development, such transformation can be understood as a strategy to sustain the existence and continuity of *salafiyah* pesantren as Islamic educational institutions. The transformation process is gradual and contextual, involving the adoption of formal education systems and the development of competency-enhancing programs in economic, business, and agricultural fields aligned with community needs. The primary objective is not merely to follow the currents of modernization, but to ensure that pesantren remain relevant and socially functional within their communities.

These findings align with the views of (Maesaroh & Achdiani, 2017), who argue that pesantren grow and evolve in tandem with societal dynamics. This process of transformation reflects pesantren's efforts to dynamically adapt without losing their scholarly identity. In this context, modern pesantren represent one developmental model, as exemplified by major pesantren such as Gontor, Tebuireng, Lirboyo, and Annawawi Berjan, which integrate *salaf* traditions with formal education.

Pondok Pesantren Nurul Qur'an and Mahirul Hikam Assalafi demonstrate similar tendencies through the development of multi-level formal education and vocational programs while maintaining a *tafaqquh fi al-din* orientation. The integration of religious and general education enables pesantren graduates to achieve academic and professional competitiveness in the modern era without being detached from their Islamic traditional roots. Thus, innovation in pesantren educational program development can be understood as a strategic response to contemporary challenges and as an actualization of pesantren's role as adaptive, sustainable, and value-based educational and social institutions. These findings reaffirm that pesantren innovation is contextual, gradual, and value-oriented, rather than a blind imitation of modernity.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis and research findings, it can be concluded that innovation in the development of *pondok pesantren* cannot be separated from the philosophical construction of pesantren education, which encompasses ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions. Ontologically, pesantren perceive education as a process of forming individuals who are faithful, knowledgeable, and morally upright, rooted in divine values. Epistemologically, pesantren position revelation, classical Islamic scholarly traditions, and chains of knowledge transmission (*sanad*) as the primary sources of knowledge, which are selectively enriched through integration with modern scientific disciplines. Axiologically, pesantren education is oriented toward character formation, the public good (*maṣlahah*), and social responsibility. These three philosophical dimensions function as normative and ethical frameworks that define the direction, boundaries, and legitimacy of educational innovation within pesantren amid ongoing social change.

Empirical findings from Pondok Pesantren Mahirul Hikam Assalafi and Pondok Pesantren Nurul Qur'an indicate that pesantren innovation develops in a gradual and contextual manner through institutional strengthening, the development of integrative curricula, and the implementation of educational and skills-based programs that respond to contemporary needs. Such innovations are not understood as a departure from pesantren traditions, but rather as strategies to sustain pesantren as institutions of *tafaqquh fi al-din* while simultaneously functioning as adaptive educational and social institutions. Theoretically, these findings reinforce the view that the philosophy of pesantren education plays a central role in mediating the tension between tradition and modernity. Practically, this study provides a reference for pesantren administrators and policymakers in designing educational innovations that are contextual, sustainable, and firmly grounded in the core values of pesantren.

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