
Position Paper

Situating Indonesian *Pesantren* within Literacy Practice and Religious Moderation in Post-Truth Era

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Abstract

This paper delves into the contemporary dynamics characterizing the educational practices of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in Indonesia, focusing on their intersection with literacy practices and the principles of religious moderation. Indonesia's *pesantren* system has been a cornerstone of Islamic education for centuries, and this study seeks to shed light on how these traditional institutions are adapting to modern contexts while preserving their core values. Through a comprehensive analysis of literature and theories, we argue on the multifaceted ways in which literacy practices are integrated into the curriculum of *pesantren*, enabling students to engage effectively with both religious texts and broader educational content. Moreover, we also explore how these literacy practices align with the principles of religious moderation, fostering an environment that promotes tolerance, dialogue, and ethical conduct among students in a modern world.

Keywords

Pesantren; religious moderation; literacy practice; third space learning

Introduction

Literacy is one of the priority programs of the Indonesian government, as stipulated in the Minister of Education and Culture Regulation No. 23 of 2015 regarding the Cultivation of Character. Therefore, the development and strengthening of character through literacy activities are comprehensive efforts carried out within the framework of educational ecosystem development, both in the family environment, schools, higher education institutions, and the community (Atmazaki, et al., 2017).

Despite the importance of the discussion process in enhancing an individual's skills, discussions do not seem to have become a tradition in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), especially in traditional ones (Muhakamurrohman, 2014). Students are expected to prioritize a respectful attitude towards teachers,



who are often referred to as "Kiai" in the *pesantren* tradition. The educational methodology in *pesantren* tradition relies on the interaction pattern between *Kiai* and students, which tends to be one-way. Generally, *pesantren* education follows the "*Ta'lim al-Muta'allim*" approach, which involves intensive teaching through a *sorogan* system (students read, memorize, and explain scriptures) and *bandongan* system (*Kiai* lecture scriptures and students listen). Nevertheless, the changing times require *pesantren* to reformulate their educational methodology, which can simultaneously strengthen tradition. Furthermore, current *pesantren* and students face not only the massive development of digital technology but also the challenges of radical and liberal ideological currents that impact personal and national identities. Social media has become a tool that gives birth to the post-truth era, which can threaten religious truths, where truths are excessively questioned, leading to deception (Naqqiyah & Nurdin, 2019). Post-truth can shape discourses that make people believe more in what aligns with their beliefs, even if it does not match the actual facts. *Pesantren* and students need to adapt to these challenges (Fadhliyah, 2019).

Religious moderation is one of the ideas that can provide a solution for *pesantren* in facing the challenges of the post-truth era, which is a concept of religion that is open or inclusive in nature (Dodego & Witro, 2020). The goal of religious moderation is to achieve a solid understanding of Islamic concepts and national perspectives (Rohimah, 2019), resulting in the creation of a tolerant, peaceful, and harmonious society within a diverse life context. By adjusting educational and teaching methodologies that emphasize literacy and argumentation skills, while also making religious moderation a foundation, *pesantren* plays a significant role in countering radical and liberal ideologies in the post-truth era.

Literacy and Character Development vs. Traditional Educational Methods

Current literature highlights the evolving educational landscape, particularly in the context of *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) in Indonesia (Ma'arif, 2019; Mulya, Sakhiyya, Muslim, & Suryani, 2022). This discussion revolves around the tensions between modern approaches to education that emphasize literacy and character development (Hull & Schultz, 2012; Muassomah, 2020) and the traditional methods that have long been practiced in these institutions (Jannah, 2022; Tan, 2014). This dynamic underscore the nature of the educational landscape in Indonesia. This intricate balance between innovation and tradition continues to shape the discourse surrounding *pesantren* education, fostering a deeper understanding of its unique position within the broader context of global educational trends.

Literacy, in this context, refers to the ability to read, write, and comprehend various forms of information (Parlindungan, 2019; Parlindungan, November 2019). Character development involves nurturing ethical, moral, and social values in individuals. The emphasis on literacy and character development aligns with contemporary educational theories that recognize the importance of not only imparting knowledge but also fostering well-rounded individuals who can contribute positively to society (Herman et al, 2020).

Modern educational approaches emphasize critical thinking, communication skills, and ethical behavior. By focusing on literacy, students can access a wide range of information, evaluate it critically, and form well-informed opinions (Tamboer, Kleemans, & Daalmans, 2022). This helps them engage with complex issues and contribute to discussions in various domains. Character development goes hand in hand with literacy, as it aims to cultivate qualities such as empathy, integrity, and resilience, shaping students into responsible and compassionate citizens (Fink & Geller 2016).

In the traditional *pesantren* setting, the educational approach has often centered around religious studies and adherence to established norms. The relationship between the teacher (*Kiai*) and students is typically hierarchical, with students expected to show deep respect and obedience to the teacher (Wardi & Ismail, 2018). The traditional methods involve memorization of religious texts, listening to lectures, and limited room for open discussions or critical thinking. These traditional methods have historical significance



and have played a role in preserving religious and cultural heritage. The strong teacher-student relationship fosters discipline, reverence, and a deep sense of community (Harnadi, Siahaan, & Hilmy, 2021). However, these methods might limit students' exposure to diverse perspectives and hinder the development of skills that are crucial in today's interconnected and rapidly changing world.

The tensions arise from the need to strike a balance between preserving tradition and adapting to contemporary challenges. The emphasis on literacy and character development acknowledges the importance of equipping students with skills that are relevant in the modern era. These skills empower students to analyze information critically, engage in meaningful dialogue, and contribute effectively to society.

On the other hand, traditional methods contribute significantly to the preservation of not only cultural identity but also the deeply ingrained religious values that hold society together (Inman, Howard, Beaumont & Walker, 2007). By grounding education in these time-honored practices, students are imbued with a profound sense of heritage and an intimate connection to their roots. These methods serve as a conduit through which history, customs, and spiritual beliefs are transmitted across generations, fostering a sense of continuity, and belonging that is essential in today's rapidly changing world (Stewart, Seiple, & Hoover, 2020).

However, there is a legitimate concern that an exclusive focus on these traditional methods could potentially leave students less equipped to grapple with the complexities of the present and the challenges of the future. As Rizvi (2009) mentioned that in an era marked by rapid technological advancements, global interconnectivity, and a constantly evolving knowledge landscape, the ability to engage in open discussions and employ critical thinking has never been more crucial. A rigid adherence to traditional teaching approaches might inadvertently limit students' exposure to diverse perspectives and novel ideas (Brunila & Rossi, 2018). This could hinder their capacity to adapt to an ever-changing world, where the ability to navigate through multifaceted viewpoints and solve intricate problems is paramount.

Therefore, striking a balance between traditional and modern educational methods becomes imperative. By integrating the richness of heritage with the dynamism of contemporary pedagogical techniques, educators can provide students with a comprehensive skill set. This holistic approach ensures that students not only retain a strong sense of cultural and religious identity but also develop the cognitive flexibility and analytical prowess needed to excel in an increasingly interconnected and complex global landscape (Beyers, 2009; Harnadi et al., 2021). It is by recognizing the value of both traditional wisdom and contemporary insights that we can truly prepare the next generation to thrive in a world that demands both a firm grounding in tradition and the ability to navigate the uncharted waters of innovation.

Challenges of Digital Technology and Ideological Currents vs. Religious Moderation

The current debate delves into the intersection of technology, ideology, and religious values within the context of *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) and the broader society. This discussion explores the complexities arising from the influence of digital technology and the potential for radical and liberal ideologies to impact traditional religious values and practices (Setia & Rahman, 2022).

Digital technology has rapidly transformed various aspects of life, including education, communication, and information dissemination. While technology offers numerous benefits, it also presents challenges that can be particularly pronounced within religious educational settings. Schlesinger (2020) argue that ideological currents refer to prevailing thought patterns, beliefs, and perspectives that shape society's



values and actions. In the context of *pesantren* and religious education, two significant ideological currents are radicalism and liberalism (Ma'arif, 2019; Zarkasyi, 2008).

Religious moderation, as a response to these challenges, advocates for a balanced and inclusive interpretation of religious teachings. It aims to counter radicalism's extreme interpretations and liberalism's potential disregard for traditional values (Dodego & Witro, 2020). The debates carry significant implications for the literacy development of Islamic students, particularly those enrolled in *pesantren* or Islamic boarding schools (Rohimah, 2019). These implications resonate deeply within the context of religious education, shedding light on how students' reading, interpretation, and critical thinking skills are impacted by the complex interplay of technology, ideology, and religious values (Parlindungan, 2019).

Sahin (2018) argues that as digital technology continues to shape the modern educational landscape, Islamic students are exposed to a diverse range of interpretations and perspectives concerning their faith. This exposure offers a unique opportunity for the development of critical thinking skills. Through evaluating and contrasting these viewpoints, students are compelled to navigate the intricacies of religious discourse, enhancing their ability to discern and analyze the multiplicity of interpretations that exist (Brunila & Rossi, 2018). In this digital age, misinformation spreads at an alarming rate, challenging students' ability to discern authentic religious knowledge from distortion. Thus, the cultivation of media literacy becomes paramount. Islamic students must learn not only to engage with digital resources but also to critically evaluate the credibility of information they encounter, ensuring the preservation of accurate religious teachings.

The dichotomy between radicalism and liberalism requires Islamic students to engage in nuanced critical analysis. This not only empowers them to comprehend these ideological currents within the framework of their faith but also equips them with the skills to contribute meaningfully to discussions concerning contemporary issues that intersect with religious values (Tamboer et al., 2022). The fusion of traditional pedagogical approaches with modern digital resources underscores the importance of adaptability in education. Islamic students are challenged to synthesize these methods, seamlessly transitioning between the age-old teachings of their faith and the digital tools that shape their educational journey.

Jamilah (2021) suggests that integral to the literacy development of Islamic students is the emphasis on ethical conduct and compassionate interactions advocated by religious moderation. Beyond the realms of textual understanding, students are encouraged to internalize and apply these values to their everyday interactions, thus nurturing a holistic approach to their literacy development (Tan, 2014). Incorporating these principles not only enhances their reading and comprehension abilities but also cultivates a well-rounded foundation that equips Islamic students with the tools to navigate the complexities of modern society with wisdom and empathy.

***Pesantren* as a Dynamic Third Space**

The call for inclusive interpretation and tolerance resonates deeply with the cultural and religious literacy of Islamic students. Encouraging them to engage with diverse perspectives fosters a comprehensive understanding of their faith, enabling them to navigate an increasingly interconnected global landscape. Incorporating critical thinking as a cornerstone of literacy, the principles of religious moderation equip Islamic students with the tools to discern reliable sources amidst the deluge of digital information. This proficiency extends beyond their religious studies, enriching their broader educational experience and facilitating informed decision-making in various facets of life.

As such, *pesantren* in the above notion can be (re)defined as a dynamic third space for learning knowledge and developing identity. The concept of the "dynamic third space" for learning refers to an educational environment that goes beyond traditional dichotomies (Tasler & Dale, 2021), such as



teacher-student or home-school, and creates a collaborative and adaptable space where diverse cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds can interact and influence each other. This term is often used in the context of multicultural education and refers to the idea that meaningful learning can occur when the unique experiences and perspectives of students, educators, and their communities intersect and coalesce (Ikpeze, 2016).

Ultimately, the convergence of these concepts and their implications underscores the intricate relationship between technology, ideology, religious values, and Islamic students' literacy development. Navigating the complexities presented by this intersection empowers students to cultivate a well-rounded literacy that extends beyond the confines of religious education, enriching their understanding of the world and their role within it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the tension between literacy, character development, and traditional methods in Indonesian *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) reflects the broader challenges of balancing heritage with the demands of a rapidly changing world. Finding ways to integrate these aspects can result in an educational approach that respects tradition while equipping students with the skills they need to thrive in contemporary society.

For future researchers, delving deeper into the mechanisms through which character development and traditional values of *pesantren* can synergize with literacy acquisition would be invaluable. Exploring case studies across different cultural and educational contexts could provide insights into effective strategies and best practices. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking the long-term impact of such integrated approaches on students' academic achievements, personal growth, and contributions to society would contribute significantly to the field.

Policy makers should consider the importance of fostering an educational environment that acknowledges cultural diversity and heritage, while also promoting the acquisition of 21st-century skills. Integrating character education into curriculum frameworks and providing professional development opportunities for teachers in multicultural and holistic pedagogies could be crucial steps. Furthermore, policies that encourage collaboration between educators, parents, and community leaders to reinforce these values beyond the classroom would create a more comprehensive learning experience.

Educators play a central role in translating theory into practice in the context of Indonesian *pesantren*. It is essential for them to receive training that empowers them to create inclusive and dynamic learning environments. They should be encouraged to embrace innovative teaching methods that integrate character development and literacy, and to design activities that encourage students to apply ethical values in real-life situations. Educators can also benefit from ongoing support networks, access to resources, and platforms for sharing experiences and successful strategies.

Ultimately, the goal should be to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity within *pesantren*, acknowledging the inherent value of both while preparing students for the complexities of an interconnected world. By addressing this tension through research, policy adjustments, and educator empowerment, we can pave the way for an Islamic education system that not only imparts knowledge but also fosters well-rounded individuals capable of contributing positively to a rapidly evolving global landscape.



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