



Curriculum Construction of Traditional Islamic Boarding Schools in Padang Lawas Regency, North Sumatra Province

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Abstract: This study examines the curriculum of traditional Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Padang Lawas Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia, within the context of ongoing efforts to balance classical Islamic educational traditions with contemporary educational demands. The objectives of this research are to analyze: (1) the current condition of the traditional pesantren curriculum, (2) the obstacles encountered in its implementation, and (3) the construction of the curriculum within learning practices. This research employed a qualitative field research approach conducted directly in traditional pesantren across Padang Lawas Regency. The study involved 18 traditional Islamic boarding schools as the research population. Data were collected through observations and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders and were analyzed using qualitative data analysis techniques to generate a comprehensive understanding of curriculum implementation and development. The findings indicate that the traditional pesantren curriculum primarily consists of learning materials, classical Islamic texts (kitab kuning), instructional methods, and evaluation systems. The curriculum is predominantly oriented toward Islamic sciences, reflecting the historical and religious identity of traditional pesantren. However, several challenges were identified, including unsystematic curriculum planning, limited diversity in teaching methods, inadequate human resource competencies, insufficient educational facilities and infrastructure, non-standardized evaluation mechanisms, low adaptability to contemporary educational developments, and management systems that remain largely traditional. The study further reveals that curriculum construction in these pesantren has gradually evolved through the integration of classical Islamic studies with general education, science and technology, and vocational competencies such as entrepreneurship. Despite these developments, Islamic studies continue to serve as the central component of the curriculum. This integration reflects an effort to maintain the authenticity of traditional Islamic education while responding to the needs of modern society. In conclusion, the traditional pesantren curriculum in Padang Lawas Regency is characterized by strong classical Islamic foundations and a commitment to preserving religious values. Nevertheless, systematic curriculum reform, improved institutional management, enhanced teaching competencies, and greater integration of contemporary knowledge are necessary to strengthen its relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability in the modern educational era.

Keywords: Curriculum construction; Islamic education; Pesantren curriculum; Qualitative research; Traditional Islamic boarding school

Introduction

Traditional Islamic boarding schools (pesantren salafiyah) represent one of the oldest and most

influential indigenous educational institutions in Indonesia. Beyond their role in transmitting Islamic knowledge, these institutions function as centers for character formation, cultural preservation, and

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community empowerment. However, the rapid transformation of society driven by globalization, technological advancement, and changing labor market demands has created new challenges for traditional pesantren. While maintaining their classical Islamic identity, these institutions are increasingly expected to equip students with competencies relevant to contemporary social and economic realities. This situation raises important questions regarding the adequacy, structure, and relevance of the traditional pesantren curriculum in responding to modern educational needs.

The significance of this research is grounded in the fact that curriculum serves as the core component of the educational process. Curriculum is a strategic framework that guides educational objectives, learning experiences, instructional implementation, and assessment processes. Effective curriculum design contributes significantly to educational quality, learner achievement, and institutional development (Gazali & Budiana, 2023). A well-constructed curriculum directly influences the quality of learning outcomes and institutional effectiveness. In traditional pesantren, curriculum development often evolves through inherited practices and the authority of religious leaders (kiai), resulting in unique educational traditions that may not always align with contemporary educational standards. Therefore, investigating how traditional pesantren construct and implement their curricula is essential for understanding their educational strengths and limitations. It reflects a unique educational ecosystem that integrates spiritual values, social norms, and cultural practices, making it an inseparable part of Indonesian Islamic civilization (Cahyono et al., 2024).

The relationship between pesantren and society is characterized by strong reciprocity. On the one hand, pesantren emerge from community needs for religious education and moral development; on the other hand, they are sustained by continuous community support through various forms of Islamic philanthropy such as waqf, sadaqah, and charitable donations (Makhrus et al., 2024; Uula & Ali, 2025). This mutual relationship ensures the sustainability of pesantren as educational institutions while simultaneously reinforcing their legitimacy within the social structure. Beyond financial and material support, communities also contribute to the moral and cultural reinforcement of pesantren, making them resilient institutions across generations.

In addition to their educational function, pesantren also play a broader role in social and community empowerment. Recent studies indicate that pesantren increasingly contribute to social transformation through character development, leadership training, human resource development, and community-based empowerment programs. These initiatives strengthen

the capacity of pesantren to respond to contemporary social challenges while maintaining their religious identity (Cahyono et al., 2024; Fathurrohman & Arifi, 2024). Pesantren are therefore not only centers of Islamic learning but also institutions that foster social responsibility and community resilience. Furthermore, pesantren serve as centers of da'wah, moral guidance, and cultural preservation, contributing significantly to ethical development and social harmony within Indonesian society (Cahyono et al., 2024). Although salafiyah (traditional) pesantren continue to preserve their classical identity, they are increasingly challenged to adapt to the demands of modernization, technological advancement, and changing societal expectations. This situation requires curriculum development that remains rooted in Islamic traditions while incorporating broader competencies relevant to contemporary life.

This condition has encouraged the modernization of the pesantren education system. Modernization does not imply abandoning traditional Islamic values; rather, it involves integrating classical Islamic scholarship with contemporary educational needs. Recent studies indicate that many pesantren have adopted national curriculum standards, incorporated science and technology subjects, and implemented innovative learning approaches while maintaining their commitment to Islamic teachings. The integration of religious values and modern educational content has been shown to improve educational quality and enhance students' competencies in responding to contemporary challenges (Junaenah et al., 2026; Firdaus & Mardiana, 2023; Hidayati, 2025). Furthermore, curriculum reform in pesantren increasingly emphasizes stakeholder participation, adaptive management, and the development of balanced competencies that combine religious knowledge with practical and technological skills.

From a broader perspective, the transformation of pesantren reflects global trends in Islamic education characterized by digitalization, educational innovation, and the integration of twenty-first-century skills. Studies have shown that pesantren are evolving from purely traditional institutions into dynamic educational organizations capable of responding to globalization while preserving their distinctive identity. Curriculum development is increasingly directed toward integrating Islamic traditions, scientific literacy, leadership development, and community engagement. Such transformations demonstrate that pesantren remain relevant educational institutions capable of contributing to social development, human resource enhancement, and sustainable community empowerment in the modern era (Mas'udi, 2024; Wibowo, 2025; Hadi et al., 2023). As such, pesantren are increasingly challenged to integrate digital technologies, innovative pedagogies,

and competency-based learning into their educational systems.

At the local level, the development of pesantren remains significant in Padang Lawas Regency, North Sumatra Province. According to data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs (2024), dozens of pesantren continue to operate across the region, demonstrating their important role in religious education, community development, and cultural preservation. However, the distribution and development of pesantren are uneven, reflecting broader educational disparities commonly found in developing countries. Geographic conditions, infrastructure availability, institutional capacity, and access to educational resources often influence the quality and sustainability of educational institutions. Similar patterns have been observed internationally, where educational inequalities remain a major challenge in achieving equitable and inclusive education (UNESCO, 2024; Marginson, 2024; Bray, 2023).

In recent decades, pesantren have experienced substantial curriculum transformation driven by globalization, technological advancement, and changing societal expectations. Traditional learning centered on kitab kuning has gradually been complemented by national curriculum standards, science and technology education, digital literacy, and competency-based learning approaches. Studies indicate that curriculum modernization enables pesantren to strengthen educational quality while maintaining their Islamic identity and cultural heritage (Cahyono et al., 2024; Nugroho & Astutik, 2024; Junaenah et al., 2026). This transformation reflects broader developments in Islamic education worldwide, where religious institutions are increasingly expected to equip students with both religious knowledge and twenty-first-century competencies, including critical thinking, communication skills, and technological literacy (Berglund, 2020; Sahin, 2018).

Despite these developments, pesantren continue to face challenges in balancing tradition and modernity. Excessive emphasis on modernization may weaken their traditional role as centers for transmitting classical Islamic scholarship, while insufficient adaptation may reduce their relevance in contemporary society. Recent studies highlight that curriculum reform should not merely focus on content expansion but also promote reflective learning, educational innovation, institutional governance, and community engagement. Therefore, curriculum reconstruction in pesantren should be adaptive, integrative, and context-sensitive, combining Islamic values with modern competencies to ensure that graduates remain religiously grounded while being capable of responding to global challenges and social transformation (Hefner, 2019; Waghid, 2014; Jamil et al., 2025). This study focuses on analyzing the traditional

pesantren curriculum in Padang Lawas Regency, examining its implementation, challenges, and construction in learning practices. It also explores how classical Islamic traditions and modern curriculum innovations are integrated within local educational contexts. Through this analysis, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how traditional pesantren can remain relevant in the modern era while preserving their essential Islamic identity.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a field research design to explore the construction of the traditional pesantren curriculum in its natural setting. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables a comprehensive understanding of meanings, experiences, and social dynamics embedded in educational practices within specific social and cultural contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). In addition, qualitative inquiry allows researchers to examine educational phenomena holistically and to generate contextual interpretations based on participants' perspectives (Miles et al., 2020). The study was conducted in traditional Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Padang Lawas Regency, North Sumatra Province, from December 2024 to February 2025. Using purposive sampling, 18 traditional pesantrens were selected from a population of 37 institutions based on their continued implementation of the classical kitab kuning learning system and their relevance to the research objectives (Etikan & Bala, 2017).

Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources through direct observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews with pesantren leaders and teachers, and documentation review. Observation was conducted to examine curriculum implementation and learning activities, while interviews were used to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations regarding curriculum practices (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2018). Secondary data were obtained from institutional documents, curriculum records, books, and relevant scholarly publications. The collected data were analyzed inductively using the interactive model proposed by Miles et al. (2020), which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Through this analytical process, the study sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of curriculum conditions, implementation challenges, and curriculum construction practices in traditional pesantrens, as well as their adaptation to contemporary educational demands. Figure 1 illustrates the research flowchart employed in this study.

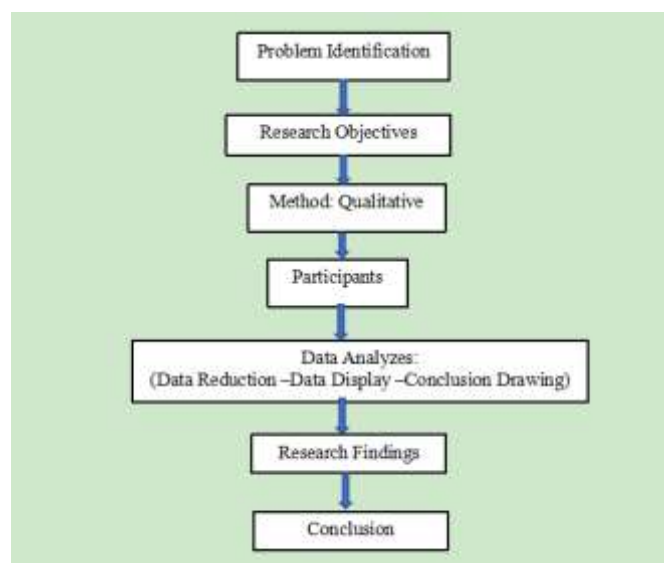


Figure 1. Research flowchart

Result and Discussion

The Use of Traditional Islamic Boarding School Curriculum

Curriculum plays a fundamental role in determining the success of any educational process. A well-structured, systematic, and relevant curriculum is a key factor in achieving educational objectives across formal, non-formal, and informal institutions. Effective curriculum management provides direction for teaching and learning activities, aligns educational goals with instructional practices, and contributes significantly to the quality of educational outcomes. Conversely, inadequate curriculum planning and implementation may hinder the achievement of institutional objectives and reduce the effectiveness of the educational process (Nasbi, 2017; Mulia et al., 2023).

As Indonesia's oldest Islamic educational institution, the pesantren holds a strategic position as a center for religious education, Islamic preaching, and community development. Historically, pesantren have existed in various local forms such as dayah in Aceh and surau in West Sumatra, reflecting the deep-rooted tradition of Islamic education in the archipelago. Over time, pesantren curricula have continuously evolved, adapting to social changes and modern educational demands while maintaining their traditional values (Nashihin, 2018). This demonstrates that pesantren are not static institutions, but dynamic systems capable of adapting to changing times.

The fundamental principle of curriculum development lies in identifying appropriate learning patterns that can guide the achievement of educational goals. With a clear learning pattern, the educational process becomes more systematic, structured, and outcome-oriented.

Based on interview findings, the objectives of the traditional Islamic boarding school curriculum in Padang Lawas Regency, North Sumatra Province, are primarily directed toward the holistic formation of students' character. The curriculum aims to develop santri who possess strong moral integrity, comprehensive understanding of Islamic teachings, and the ability to apply these values in daily life.

More specifically, the curriculum is designed to produce Muslim individuals who are knowledgeable, ethical, and socially responsible. This includes preparing students not only to master religious sciences but also to demonstrate proper conduct, sincerity, and social awareness in community life. In addition, the curriculum also seeks to cultivate future religious scholars and community leaders and Islamic preachers, who are expected to guide and serve society.

Furthermore, a key objective of the pesantren curriculum is the preservation of classical Islamic scholarly tradition ensuring the continuity of Islamic intellectual heritage across generations. As emphasized by one informant, the pesantren aims "to produce a generation that is not only knowledgeable in religious matters but also possesses good manners, sincerity, and social responsibility" (Interview with H. M. Zuhaj Kurnia Nasution, 12 February 2025).

In the context of the Traditional Islamic Boarding School Curriculum in Padang Lawas Regency, North Sumatra, curriculum development tends to emphasize a process-oriented learning approach, commonly referred to as a humanistic approach. This is reflected in the pesantren's efforts to enhance students' competencies through practical learning activities and skill-based training, which are given greater emphasis compared to purely theoretical instruction.

The philosophical foundation of curriculum development in Padang Lawas pesantren is deeply rooted in long-standing Islamic values that are embedded within the local socio-cultural life of the community. The primary objective of this curriculum is to develop santri with strong spiritual intelligence, beneficial knowledge and the ability to attain prosperity in order to contribute positively to society in a broader sense.

In addition to formal and non-formal curricula, pesantren education also incorporates a hidden curriculum that plays a crucial role in shaping students' character and moral development. This hidden curriculum consists of implicit values such as discipline, responsibility, independence, cooperation, and social ethics that are cultivated through daily interactions, communal living, religious practices, and institutional culture within the pesantren environment. These values contribute significantly to the internalization of character education by emphasizing not only cognitive

achievement but also moral and spiritual formation. Recent studies have shown that pesantren culture remains a powerful medium for nurturing students' character and strengthening moral education in the digital era (Cahyono et al., 2024). Furthermore, contemporary scholarship highlights the importance of integrating spiritual values with broader social and environmental awareness, enabling pesantren to develop students' ethical responsibility toward society and the environment (Nashihin et al., 2022; Muis et al., 2025).

Within the pesantren context, the concept of curriculum extends beyond a mere collection of subject matter. It represents a comprehensive educational experience encompassing academic learning, spiritual guidance, character formation, and social interaction. Curriculum implementation in pesantren integrates teaching activities, value internalization, and community engagement within a holistic educational framework. Consequently, curriculum reconstruction has become increasingly necessary to ensure that pesantren remain responsive to societal changes, technological advancement, and contemporary educational demands while preserving their Islamic identity. Recent studies indicate that curriculum transformation in pesantren should emphasize the integration of traditional Islamic scholarship, modern knowledge, digital literacy, and life skills to enhance educational relevance and institutional sustainability (Arif et al., 2024; Ahsan, 2024; Alif et al., 2025).

Another distinctive feature of pesantren is their high level of institutional autonomy. Pesantren possess considerable flexibility in determining educational policies, curriculum content, instructional methods, and institutional governance without being entirely dependent on standardized government regulations. This autonomy allows each pesantren to develop educational models that reflect its vision, mission, and scholarly orientation under the leadership of the kiai as both spiritual authority and institutional leader. Such a leadership structure enables pesantren to maintain their traditional values while adapting to emerging educational challenges and community needs. Recent research demonstrates that the sustainability and adaptability of pesantren are closely related to their autonomous governance systems and their capacity to balance tradition with educational innovation (Mas'udi, 2024; Kusumawati & Nurfuadi, 2024; Muis et al., 2025). Historically, during the 19th century, detailed descriptions of pesantren learning materials were rarely documented. Over time, however, the pesantren curriculum expanded to include various disciplines derived from core Islamic sciences. These include Qur'anic studies with *tajwid* and *tafsir*, *'aqidah* and *kalam*, *fiqh* and *usul fiqh* as well as *qawa'id al-fiqh*, *hadith* and

musthalah al-hadith, and Arabic linguistic sciences such as *nahwu*, *sarf*, *bayan*, *ma'ani*, *'arudh*, and others.

In contemporary practice, the curriculum of traditional pesantren in Padang Lawas Regency generally focuses on six core Islamic disciplines, namely *Nahwu-Sharaf*, *Fiqh*, *'Aqaid/Tauhid*, *Tasawwuf/Akhlak*, *Tafsir*, and *Hadith*. These disciplines remain the backbone of Islamic scholarly tradition within pesantren education and continue to shape the intellectual and spiritual identity of students.

Furthermore, recent studies indicate that many traditional pesantren have adopted integrative curriculum models that combine classical Islamic learning, formal education, digital literacy, and technological adaptation while maintaining their salafiyah identity and core religious values (Taqiyuddin et al., 2025; Alif et al., 2025; Muis et al., 2025). These findings indicate that curriculum development in pesantren is not merely an administrative process but a strategic effort to ensure educational relevance, institutional sustainability, and responsiveness to contemporary societal challenges.

Challenges in the Implementation of the Traditional Islamic Boarding School Curriculum

Based on the interview findings, conflict in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), both among students and between santri and management, is considered a natural part of daily life. However, such conflicts are managed through an Islamic value-based approach that emphasizes deliberation, advice, and spiritual guidance. This approach is consistently applied to maintain harmony within the environment and to strengthen students' moral and emotional character development. As stated by one of the informants:

"Conflicts among students are normal in daily life at the pesantren. We never solve them with punishment alone. Instead, we prioritize discussion, advice, and spiritual guidance so that the students can reflect on their behavior. This method is effective in maintaining harmony and building their character." (Interview with Islamic boarding school administrator, Padang Lawas Regency, 2025).

In the context of Padang Lawas Regency, which has approximately 30 Islamic boarding schools, the management system is still largely characterized by a traditional-charismatic model, where authority is centralized in the figure of the Islamic teacher. He plays a dominant role not only as an educational leader but also as a moral and spiritual authority in institutional decision-making.

However, the findings also indicate an emerging shift in several *pesantren* toward more modern management practices. This transformation is particularly evident in administrative systems, the use of

digital technology, and financial management. Although the core leadership structure remains rooted in traditional authority, these gradual changes demonstrate that *pesantren* in Padang Lawas are not static institutions. Instead, they are evolving by maintaining their traditional values while simultaneously improving professionalism and institutional effectiveness to respond to contemporary educational demands (Interview summary based on field observations and discussions with *pesantren* leaders, 2025).

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of the traditional Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) curriculum in Padang Lawas Regency is confronted with a range of complex challenges, encompassing pedagogical, cultural, structural, and adaptive dimensions. These challenges suggest that curriculum development within traditional *pesantren* has not yet been fully optimized and still faces significant limitations in responding to contemporary educational demands.

From the perspective of curriculum planning, traditional *pesantren* generally lack systematically formulated curriculum documents. Curriculum design is predominantly based on inherited traditions passed down across generations and is strongly influenced by the authority of the Islamic teacher, who plays a central role in determining the direction of learning. As a result, competency standards are not clearly defined, and curriculum evaluation and development tend to be unstructured. This condition aligns with previous findings indicating that curriculum development in traditional *pesantren* remains flexible and adaptive but often lacks systematic standardization and structured quality assurance mechanisms (Ahsan, 2024; Arif et al., 2024).

In terms of instructional practice, learning methods remain dominated by classical approaches such as *bandongan*, *sorogan*, and memorization. Although these methods are effective for strengthening mastery of Islamic texts, they provide limited opportunities for interactive and student-centered learning. Furthermore, the integration of digital technology into teaching practices remains relatively low, particularly in traditional *pesantren* settings. Previous studies similarly report that technological adaptation and digital transformation continue to be significant challenges for many *pesantren* in Indonesia (Nugroho & Astutik, 2024; Muis et al., 2025).

Regarding human resources, several studies have identified limitations in teachers' professional competencies, pedagogical skills, and digital literacy. These challenges affect the effectiveness of curriculum implementation and the capacity of *pesantren* to respond to contemporary educational demands.

Research has consistently shown that improving teacher quality is a crucial factor in successful curriculum reform and institutional development within Islamic educational institutions (Ahsan, 2024; Arif et al., 2024).

Another significant challenge concerns infrastructure and educational facilities. Limited access to information technology, digital learning resources, and adequate educational facilities restricts innovation in teaching and learning processes. Similar findings have been reported in recent studies, which identify infrastructure constraints as one of the primary barriers to modernization and digital transformation in *pesantren* education (Nugroho & Astutik, 2024; Muis et al., 2025).

In terms of assessment practices, evaluation systems in traditional *pesantren* remain largely focused on students' mastery of classical texts, memorization ability, and moral conduct. Although these dimensions are central to *pesantren* education, the absence of standardized competency-based assessment frameworks often limits objective measurement of learning outcomes. This finding is consistent with previous research emphasizing the need for more systematic curriculum evaluation and quality assurance mechanisms in *pesantren* education (Ahsan, 2024; Aryadi et al., 2025).

Overall, these findings indicate that traditional *pesantren* are currently undergoing a transitional phase between preserving classical Islamic intellectual traditions and responding to the demands of educational modernization. Consequently, curriculum reconstruction is needed to create a more adaptive and balanced educational framework. Such reconstruction should integrate Islamic intellectual heritage with contemporary competencies, including digital literacy, critical thinking, and technological adaptation. This direction is supported by recent studies advocating an integrative curriculum model that combines religious knowledge, modern sciences, and technological innovation while maintaining the distinctive identity of *pesantren* (Alif et al., 2025; Muis et al., 2025).

Curriculum Construction of Traditional Islamic Boarding Schools

In the curriculum construction of traditional Islamic boarding schools, teaching methodology plays a central role in shaping the overall learning process. The findings of this study indicate that instructional practices are still predominantly characterized by traditional approaches, namely individual learning, collective/classical instruction, and memorization focusing on mastering classical texts and the Qur'an. These pedagogical models represent long-established elements of the traditional *pesantren* curriculum and have proven effective in transmitting Islamic knowledge across generations.

However, these methods tend to remain static and have not undergone significant innovation, indicating the need for pedagogical development to make learning more varied, interactive, and responsive to contemporary educational demands. This was confirmed by one of the informants:

"In our pesantren, the main learning methods are still sorogan, bandongan, and memorization. These methods have been used for a long time and are considered effective for understanding classical Islamic books. However, we also realize that the methods are still traditional and have not changed much, especially in terms of learning innovation." (Interview with ustadz, Padang Lawas Regency, 2025).

In terms of learning objectives, the traditional pesantren curriculum is generally not explicitly formulated in formal written documents. Instead, its objectives are reflected in daily educational practices within the pesantren environment. Broadly, these objectives include the formation of morally upright students, deep mastery of Islamic sciences, and the ability to apply Islamic teachings in real-life contexts. This orientation demonstrates that the curriculum prioritizes character formation and spiritual development over purely cognitive achievement. As stated by another informant:

"Our main goal is to shape students with good character, strong religious knowledge, and the ability to practice Islamic teachings in daily life. We do not only focus on knowledge, but also on morals and spiritual development." (Interview with pesantren leader, Padang Lawas Regency, 2025).

Meanwhile, the evaluation system within traditional pesantren remains relatively simple and predominantly qualitative in nature. Assessment practices generally focus on students' ability to read and understand classical Islamic texts (kitab kuning), memorization achievement, and the observation of moral conduct and discipline in daily life. Standardized competency-based assessment and systematic documentation are still limited in many traditional Islamic boarding schools (Muttaqien, 2023).

From a broader perspective, the concept of curriculum in pesantren has evolved from a focus on learning materials and religious instruction toward a more comprehensive educational framework that encompasses learning objectives, teaching strategies, character development, and institutional management. Contemporary studies suggest that curriculum reform in pesantren is increasingly directed toward integrating traditional Islamic scholarship with modern educational competencies, including critical thinking, technological literacy, and community engagement. Nevertheless, tensions remain between preserving classical traditions and responding to contemporary societal demands.

Recent research highlights that many pesantren are still in a transitional phase, seeking to maintain their distinctive religious identity while adapting to national education standards and global educational developments. Consequently, curriculum reconstruction is considered essential to create a more contextual, adaptive, and sustainable model of Islamic education that remains rooted in pesantren values while addressing the challenges of the twenty-first century (Hanifa & Ali, 2025).

Overall, the curriculum construction in traditional pesantren in Padang Lawas reflects a strong continuity of classical Islamic educational traditions, particularly in pedagogy, objectives, and evaluation systems. However, at the same time, it reveals the necessity for gradual transformation and contextual adaptation. Strengthening pedagogical innovation, clarifying learning outcomes, and developing more systematic evaluation frameworks are essential steps to ensure that traditional pesantren education remains relevant while preserving its core spiritual and moral identity.

Implications

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the construction, implementation, and challenges of the traditional Islamic boarding school (pesantren) curriculum in Padang Lawas Regency, North Sumatra Province. Overall, the results indicate that the pesantren curriculum remains strongly rooted in classical Islamic traditions, particularly through the dominance of kitab kuning-based learning, traditional pedagogical methods, and a value-oriented educational philosophy. At the same time, the study reveals an ongoing transitional dynamic in which pesantren are gradually responding to modern educational demands, although such adaptation remains uneven and limited in scope. These findings are significant because they illustrate how traditional Islamic education systems negotiate continuity and change in the context of contemporary educational transformation.

From the perspective of curriculum structure and implementation, the study shows that the pesantren curriculum is still largely informal and undocumented, with strong dependence on the authority of the kyai as the central decision-maker. This finding is consistent with previous studies that describe pesantren as institutions whose educational policies, organizational culture, and curriculum practices are strongly influenced by charismatic leadership and local traditions (Prasetyo et al., 2024; Carnawi et al., 2024). The absence of standardized curriculum documentation suggests that curriculum development in traditional pesantren is primarily experiential and tradition-based rather than system-based or competency-based. This condition reflects the ongoing challenge of balancing traditional

knowledge transmission with contemporary demands for educational accountability, curriculum standardization, and institutional quality assurance (Ahsan, 2024; Berglund, 2020).

The dominance of classical teaching methods such as sorogan, bandongan, and memorization further strengthens the traditional character of pesantren education. These methods have historically played a significant role in preserving and transmitting Islamic knowledge through direct interaction between teachers and students. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that instructional practices in many traditional pesantren remain largely teacher-centered and provide limited opportunities for collaborative learning, critical inquiry, and active student participation. Recent studies have shown that Islamic educational institutions continue to face challenges in integrating innovative pedagogical approaches while maintaining their religious and cultural identity. The persistence of conventional instructional models reflects the broader challenge of balancing the preservation of Islamic scholarly traditions with the adoption of contemporary teaching practices that promote higher-order thinking skills and learner autonomy (Memon et al., 2023; Hashim & Langgulgung, 2022).

In terms of educational objectives, the study reveals that the pesantren curriculum is primarily directed toward developing religious commitment, moral integrity, and mastery of Islamic sciences. These objectives reflect the holistic nature of Islamic education, which emphasizes the formation of character and spirituality alongside intellectual development. However, contemporary educational discourse increasingly highlights the importance of equipping students with competencies relevant to the twenty-first century, including critical thinking, digital literacy, communication skills, and problem-solving abilities. Recent international studies suggest that Islamic educational institutions worldwide are undergoing curriculum transformation to integrate traditional religious knowledge with modern competencies required in a globalized society. Consequently, pesantren are challenged to maintain their distinctive educational identity while simultaneously preparing students to navigate social, technological, and economic changes in contemporary life (Sahin, 2024; Halstead, 2023; Ghazali, 2024).

Another important finding concerns the evaluation system used in traditional pesantren, which remains largely qualitative and informal. Student assessment is commonly conducted through oral examinations, memorization tests, and continuous observation of behavior, discipline, and religious commitment. Such practices reflect a holistic understanding of educational success, where moral and spiritual development are

considered as important as academic achievement. However, the absence of standardized assessment procedures and measurable learning outcomes may limit the effectiveness of curriculum evaluation and quality assurance processes. Recent studies on Islamic education emphasize the need for more systematic assessment frameworks that preserve the ethical and spiritual dimensions of learning while ensuring accountability, transparency, and alignment with contemporary educational standards. The development of balanced assessment systems is therefore considered an important component of curriculum reform within Islamic educational institutions (Musa et al., 2023; Ahmed & Wan Daud, 2024).

The study also highlights significant structural and contextual challenges in curriculum implementation. These include limited human resource capacity, inadequate infrastructure, and minimal integration of educational technology. These findings are consistent with recent studies that identify resource limitations as one of the key barriers to modernization in Islamic boarding schools (Asharo et al., 2025; Muzedi & Husni, 2025). The lack of teacher training in modern pedagogy and digital tools further constrains the ability of pesantren to innovate in teaching and learning processes. In this regard, the findings suggest that curriculum transformation cannot be separated from institutional capacity building, particularly in terms of teacher professionalism and infrastructure development.

Despite these challenges, the study also reveals emerging signs of adaptation within some pesantren in Padang Lawas. These include gradual improvements in administrative systems and limited adoption of digital technologies. Although still in early stages, these changes indicate that pesantren are not static institutions but are capable of incremental transformation. This supports Nugroho et al. (2024) view that Islamic boarding schools are increasingly integrating modern systems while maintaining their traditional foundations. The coexistence of tradition and innovation reflects what Cowen (2023) describes as educational hybridity in the context of global transformation, where local educational systems adapt selectively to external influences.

When viewed from a broader theoretical perspective, the findings of this study reinforce the idea that curriculum in pesantren is not merely a technical document but a lived educational experience embedded in socio-cultural and spiritual contexts. The curriculum operates not only through formal instruction but also through hidden curriculum elements such as discipline, independence, and moral habituation. This is consistent with Kholish et al. (2020), who emphasize that pesantren education is deeply rooted in experiential and value-

based learning processes. The integration of formal, informal, and hidden curriculum dimensions makes pesantren education a holistic system of character formation.

However, the persistence of traditional structures also raises critical questions regarding sustainability and relevance in the modern era. As global education systems increasingly emphasize innovation, digital transformation, and competency-based outcomes, pesantren face the challenge of maintaining their identity while responding to these demands. Sahin (2018) and Hefner (2019) both argue that Islamic education must engage in critical reform that does not abandon tradition but reinterprets it in light of contemporary realities. In this sense, the findings of this study suggest that pesantren in Padang Lawas are currently positioned in a transitional phase between preservation and transformation.

The implications of these findings are significant for curriculum development policy in Islamic education. First, there is a need for more structured curriculum documentation that can provide clarity in learning objectives, competencies, and assessment standards without undermining the traditional authority of teacher. Second, pedagogical innovation should be encouraged through teacher training programs that integrate classical Islamic knowledge with modern teaching methodologies. Third, investment in infrastructure and digital learning resources is essential to support more interactive and inclusive learning environments. Finally, curriculum reform should maintain the core values of pesantren education, particularly moral integrity and spiritual development, while expanding its relevance to contemporary societal needs.

Future research could explore comparative studies between traditional and modern pesantren to further understand the dynamics of curriculum transformation. Quantitative approaches may also be used to measure the impact of curriculum integration on student outcomes, particularly in relation to academic achievement and character development. In addition, ethnographic studies could provide deeper insights into the lived experiences of santri in navigating traditional and modern learning systems.

The findings of this study demonstrate that the traditional pesantren curriculum in Padang Lawas is characterized by strong continuity of Islamic intellectual tradition, combined with gradual and uneven adaptation to modern educational demands. While the system remains effective in preserving moral and spiritual values, it requires systematic reconstruction to enhance pedagogical innovation, curriculum clarity, and institutional capacity. Such transformation is essential to ensure that pesantren continue to play a vital role in both

preserving Islamic heritage and contributing to contemporary educational development.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the traditional pesantren curriculum in Padang Lawas Regency remains strongly rooted in classical Islamic teachings, particularly through the study of kitab kuning and the central role of kyai and teachers. While the curriculum successfully preserves traditional Islamic values, its implementation faces challenges such as limited resources, conventional teaching practices, and increasing demands for modernization. Therefore, a more integrated and adaptive curriculum is needed to maintain its religious identity while responding to contemporary educational needs.

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Author Contributions

Conceptualization, F. A. N., M. Z., and A.; methodology, F. A. N. and M. Z.; validation, M. Z. and A.; formal analysis, F. A. N.; investigation, F. A. N.; resources, F. A. N.; data curation, F. A. N.; writing – original draft preparation, F. A. N.; writing – review and editing, M. Z. and A.; visualization, F. A. N.; supervision, M. Z. and A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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