

Implementation of the Pesantren Curriculum in Developing 21st Century Skills of Santri at An-Nursali Islamic Boarding School, Binjai

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the implementation of the pesantren curriculum at An-Nursali Islamic Boarding School in Binjai, Indonesia, focusing on the development of 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through observations, interviews, and document analysis. Findings show that the integrated curriculum effectively combines religious education, academic subjects, and character development through structured routines and activities like community service and leadership roles. The study concludes that the pesantren curriculum serves as an effective model for fostering essential skills, blending traditional Islamic teachings with contemporary educational needs

INTRODUCTION

The discussion of contemporary education increasingly highlights the need to cultivate learners' competencies that extend beyond the mastery of academic content, particularly abilities related to critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity. These competencies are broadly acknowledged as fundamental for equipping students to engage with social, technological, and professional complexities characteristic of an era marked by rapid change (Liccioni et al., 2024). Consequently, curriculum implementation is no longer perceived solely as a process of delivering knowledge, but rather as a deliberate educational strategy aimed at developing transferable skills and fostering holistic learner development.

In this global educational landscape, scholarly attention to curriculum studies has predominantly centered on formal education systems, especially those operating within general and secular institutional settings. A substantial body of research has explored the role of curriculum design and instructional approaches in nurturing 21st-century skills through learner-centered methods, problem-based learning models, and collaborative pedagogical practices (Hasibuan et al., 2024). In contrast, religious educational institutions particularly Islamic boarding schools, or pesantren have received relatively limited consideration within this academic discourse (Wardi et al., 2025). Studies addressing pesantren education have largely concentrated on theological instruction, moral cultivation, and character development, often portraying pesantren as traditional institutions primarily focused on the transmission of religious knowledge (Supriyono & Dayati, 2023).

While such studies contribute valuable insights into the normative and cultural foundations of pesantren, they provide minimal empirical exploration of curriculum implementation as a means of developing students' transferable competencies. Pesantren curricula are frequently presented in descriptive terms, without systematic analysis of how instructional structures, pedagogical practices, and institutional cultures actively support skills aligned with contemporary educational expectations. This condition reflects a notable gap in the literature, particularly regarding the potential of pesantren curricula to facilitate skills commonly associated with twenty-first-century education.

Many pesantren in Indonesia have increasingly adopted integrated curricular models that combine religious instruction, general academic subjects, and character-based learning in response to contemporary educational demands while maintaining their Islamic identity. At the structural level, this shift reflects the adoption of modern schooling systems and the inclusion of non-religious subjects within pesantren curricula (Isbah, 2020). At the institutional and pedagogical level, such integration is framed as an effort to harmonize classical Islamic traditions with modern educational practices in order to prepare students for contemporary social and intellectual challenges (Sofi & Ali, 2025). From a broader educational perspective, pesantren modernization is also interpreted as part of progressive Islamic education that seeks to bridge Islam, national identity, and modernity (Suyatno et al., 2022). However, despite these conceptual advances, empirical studies examining how

integrated curricula are enacted in daily learning practices and how they contribute to students' critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity remain limited, leaving pesantren curricula underexplored as dynamic and lived educational practices.

The originality of the present study lies in its conceptualization of the pesantren curriculum not simply as a religious or moral framework, but as an alternative educational model with the capacity to cultivate 21st-century skills through the integration of formal instruction, religious learning, and institutional culture. By investigating curriculum implementation within a pesantren setting, this study offers new empirical contributions to curriculum studies and Islamic education, particularly in relation to skills-oriented educational approaches.

Grounded in this context, the primary issue addressed in this research concerns the ways in which the pesantren curriculum is implemented to support the development of students' 21st-century skills. Specifically, the study examines how curriculum structure, instructional strategies, and institutional culture at An-Nursali Islamic Boarding School influence students' critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity. Accordingly, the objective of this research is to analyze the implementation of the pesantren curriculum at An-Nursali Islamic Boarding School in Binjai and to elucidate its contribution to the development of students' 21st-century skills within the broader context of Islamic boarding school education

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. 21st-Century Skills as an Educational Framework

The concept of 21st-century skills reflects a fundamental shift in contemporary education from content transmission toward the development of transferable competencies required in complex and globalized societies. International discourse consistently emphasizes critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity as core learning outcomes essential for learners' social participation and professional adaptability (UNESCO, 2019). Within this paradigm, these skills are increasingly embedded as central objectives of curriculum design and instructional practice, rather than treated as supplementary or optional outcomes.

This shift is driven by the growing recognition that traditional rote-based pedagogies are insufficient for preparing learners to navigate rapid social, technological, and occupational change. Educational research conceptualizes 21st-century skills as interconnected cognitive, social, and metacognitive capacities, including problem-solving, innovation, self-directed learning, and information literacy, which must be enacted through everyday learning practices rather than articulated solely at the policy level (Alharbi, 2024). Among various models, the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21) framework has gained prominence for systematically organizing these competencies into learning and innovation skills, information, media, and technology skills, and life and career skills (Jelodari et al., 2025). The convergence of P21 with other international frameworks such as those proposed by OECD and ISTE indicates a strong global consensus on the centrality of these competencies, while simultaneously raising

critical questions regarding how such frameworks are interpreted, contextualized, and enacted within diverse educational traditions and settings.

2. Curriculum Implementation and Learning Strategies

Curriculum implementation refers to the process through which planned curricular objectives are translated into actual teaching and learning practices within specific institutional contexts. The literature consistently emphasizes that effective implementation depends on coherent alignment between curriculum design, instructional strategies, and institutional support systems, rather than on curricular plans alone (Nilsook et al., 2021). As a dynamic and context-dependent process, curriculum implementation plays a decisive role in shaping students' learning experiences and determining the extent to which intended outcomes particularly transferable and higher-order skills are meaningfully realized.

Within this implementation process, learner-centered instructional strategies such as problem-based learning, project-based learning, collaborative learning, and inquiry-oriented instruction are widely identified as effective mechanisms for fostering critical thinking, communication, and collaboration skills associated with 21st-century competencies. Empirical studies demonstrate that these approaches promote self-directed inquiry, knowledge integration, and social interaction when they are coherently embedded within the curriculum and supported by appropriate pedagogical and institutional conditions (Alzahrani et al., 2022; Badr, 2021; Jelodari et al., 2025). However, existing research remains limited in examining how curriculum implementation and learning strategies interact in everyday classroom practices, particularly within value-based or religious educational contexts, indicating a clear need for context-sensitive empirical investigation.

3. Pesantren Curriculum in Islamic Education

Pesantren represent a distinctive model of Islamic education characterized by the integration of religious instruction, moral formation, and communal life (Yusuf et al., 2025). The pesantren curriculum has traditionally been oriented toward the transmission of classical Islamic knowledge and the cultivation of religious character, positioning spiritual and ethical development as its primary educational objectives. Learning activities extend beyond formal classroom instruction to encompass daily practices, discipline, and social interaction, resulting in a curriculum that operates through both formal and informal learning dimensions (Hadinata et al., 2023). This holistic orientation distinguishes pesantren from conventional schooling models, while also shaping how educational change is negotiated within these institutions.

Recent scholarship has increasingly documented the transformation of pesantren curricula in response to contemporary educational demands, particularly through the incorporation of general education subjects, national curriculum frameworks, and learner-centered pedagogical approaches. This curricular evolution seeks to balance the preservation of Islamic traditions with the development of competencies associated with 21st-century skills, including critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and digital literacy (Ahsa & Arabia, 2024). Empirical studies indicate that pesantren have begun adopting

inquiry-based, project-based, and problem-based learning strategies to contextualize religious knowledge and engage students with real-world challenges (Sya'bani & Yusuf, 2024; Wasehudin et al., 2023). However, much of the existing literature emphasizes institutional reform and exemplary programs, offering limited empirical insight into how curricular integration is enacted in everyday learning practices and how traditional pedagogies are negotiated alongside modern instructional strategies. This gap underscores the need to examine pesantren curricula as dynamic and lived educational processes.

4. Pesantren Education and 21st-Century Skills Development

Recent studies indicate that pesantren education is increasingly responding to contemporary educational demands through integrated curricula that combine religious instruction, general education, and character-based learning (Siregar et al., 2024). This integration provides a structural basis for the development of 21st-century skills, particularly critical thinking, collaboration, communication, creativity, and leadership, which are embedded in daily learning activities and student responsibilities (Rika et al., 2025). Despite this trend, empirical studies that systematically examine pesantren curricula as intentional strategies for 21st-century skills development remain limited.

To address global and workforce challenges, pesantren have begun aligning traditional Islamic education with modern competencies such as digital literacy, analytical reasoning, effective communication, and entrepreneurship through adaptive and interdisciplinary curricula (Asror et al., 2023; Sofi & Ali, 2025). These curricula integrate classical and formal education systems, incorporate educational technology, and emphasize leadership and language development while remaining grounded in Islamic values and traditions (Jahidin, 2023; Samindjaya et al., 2024). This approach reflects pesantren's effort to balance cultural continuity with responsiveness to contemporary educational and societal demands.

However, existing literature predominantly highlights conceptual alignment, policy adaptation, and curriculum innovation, with limited empirical focus on how these curricula are implemented as concrete learning strategies that foster 21st-century skills in everyday instructional practice. Consequently, there is a clear research gap concerning the operationalization of pesantren curricula in developing students' cognitive, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and technological competencies. Addressing this gap is essential to understanding pesantren education as a practical, skills-oriented educational process rather than merely a normative or ideological framework

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design using a case study approach to explore the implementation of the pesantren curriculum and its contribution to the development of students' 21st-century skills. The research was conducted at An-Nursali Islamic Boarding School in Binjai, Indonesia, during the 2025–2026 academic year. Participants consisted of pesantren leaders, teachers (ustadz), and students who were directly involved in curriculum implementation and learning activities. Participants were selected through

purposive sampling based on their roles and relevance to the research focus, ensuring the collection of rich and meaningful data.

Data were collected using multiple instruments, including observation guidelines, semi-structured interview protocols, and document analysis. Observations focused on learning activities, instructional strategies, and student interactions related to 21st-century skills development. Interviews were conducted to capture participants' perspectives on curriculum implementation and learning practices, while document analysis was used to examine curriculum documents, lesson plans, and institutional records. Data collection was carried out in a natural setting without intervention in the learning process and was supported by triangulation across data sources and techniques.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis involving data reduction, data organization, and interpretation. Relevant data were categorized into themes reflecting curriculum structure, learning strategies, and institutional culture associated with 21st-century skills. The findings were then interpreted in relation to the research objectives and existing literature. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, this study applied source and technique triangulation as well as continuous analytical reflection throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Implementation of the Pesantren Curriculum at An-Nursali Islamic Boarding School

The findings indicate that the pesantren curriculum at An-Nursali Islamic Boarding School is implemented through an integrated educational framework that combines diniyah (religious) instruction, formal academic learning, and pesantren-based programs. The curriculum is designed to align religious education, general subjects, and character-building activities with shared educational goals, creating a comprehensive system that addresses both academic and non-academic development. For example, students engage in weekly Quran memorization sessions and daily recitations as part of their religious studies, while also participating in academic classes such as math, science, and language, ensuring a balanced education that fosters both intellectual and spiritual growth.

The implementation of the curriculum is reflected in the structured daily learning routines at An-Nursali Islamic Boarding School. Students participate in formal classroom learning alongside religious instruction, where they are taught core subjects such as Fiqh, Hadith, and Tafsir. They also take part in supervised pesantren activities throughout the day, such as group study sessions, religious talks, and Islamic social practices. These activities ensure that the curriculum is not confined to classroom instruction but is reinforced through daily interactions and practical applications. The structured approach to learning, which includes specific time slots for both academic and religious studies, ensures that all educational components are aligned and integrated effectively throughout the students' daily routines.

Beyond instructional activities, curriculum implementation at An-Nursali Islamic Boarding School is reinforced through institutional routines and organized student responsibilities. Daily religious practices, such as praying

together, observing fasting during Ramadan, and engaging in communal dhikr sessions, are deeply embedded in the students' lives. These practices not only nurture their spiritual development but also serve as opportunities to practice self-discipline, time management, and collaboration with others. Furthermore, students actively engage in student-led initiatives such as organizing Islamic study circles, charity events, and interfaith dialogues. These activities encourage leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving skills, aligning with the pesantren's goal of developing responsible, active, and well-rounded individuals.

In addition to academic and religious learning, dormitory life and student organizational activities play a crucial role in reinforcing the curriculum. Students take responsibility for managing their daily chores, including cleaning common areas and organizing study groups. These activities cultivate a sense of accountability, independence, and community spirit. Students also participate in leadership roles within pesantren organizations, such as student councils or religious committees, which provide them with opportunities to enhance their organizational skills and decision-making abilities. These routines and responsibilities function as integral elements of the educational process, ensuring that learning is continuous and deeply embedded in every aspect of life at the pesantren.

These findings correspond with curriculum implementation theories that emphasize coherence between curriculum design, pedagogical practice, and institutional culture (Nilsook et al., 2021). The integrated learning environment observed at An-Nursali Islamic Boarding School illustrates how curriculum implementation can operate across formal and informal domains, reinforcing learning objectives through repeated and contextualized experiences. Such coherence is widely recognized as a key condition for effective development of transferable skills in contemporary education (UNESCO, 2019).

In the context of Islamic education, this study supports previous research indicating that pesantren are increasingly adopting integrated curriculum models while maintaining their religious identity (Isbah, 2020; Suyatno et al., 2022). However, the present findings add empirical depth by demonstrating that curriculum integration at An-Nursali Islamic Boarding School is enacted through daily institutional practices rather than solely through formal curriculum design. This suggests that the pesantren curriculum functions as a holistic educational system capable of supporting competencies associated with 21st-century education

2. Learning Strategies and Skill-Oriented Practices at An-Nursali Islamic Boarding School

At Pesantren An-Nursali, learning strategies go beyond traditional classroom instruction and integrate practical, skill-oriented activities that emphasize life skills development. These practices are woven into the daily routines and social interactions, fostering critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and leadership skills. For instance, students engage in weekly community service projects, such as charity drives, clean-up initiatives, and health awareness campaigns, which offer opportunities to apply academic learning in real-world scenarios.

Additionally, students take active roles in organizing pesantren events, including religious talks and outreach programs. These experiences provide students with hands-on opportunities to develop leadership, event planning, and organizational skills while working together to achieve shared objectives. This approach aligns with the pesantren's educational philosophy of nurturing both personal and social competencies through practical, experiential learning.

Moreover, life skills are embedded in everyday activities such as group discussions on Islamic teachings, academic subjects, and societal issues. Students also participate in problem-solving activities, like peer tutoring and conflict resolution, which not only enhance academic knowledge but also improve teamwork and critical thinking. This ensures that learning is dynamic and connected to real-life applications, preparing students for future challenges. Institutional routines, such as managing dormitory chores and participating in community outreach programs, further strengthen the development of essential life skills, including independence, responsibility, adaptability, empathy, and social responsibility.

Table 1: Curriculum Activities and Skills Developed at Pesantren An-Nursali

Activity/Practice	Skills Developed	Description
Community Service (e.g., charity drives, clean-ups, health campaigns)	Critical thinking, communication, social responsibility	Students apply academic knowledge in real-world social initiatives.
Organizing Pesantren Events	Leadership, event planning, teamwork	Students take responsibility for managing religious and community programs.
Group Discussions	Collaboration, critical thinking, communication	Reflecting on Islamic teachings and societal issues fosters teamwork and deepens learning.
Peer Tutoring and Problem-Solving	Critical thinking, collaboration, adaptability	Encouraging peer support and resolving disputes develops problem-solving skills.
Dormitory Life and Social Initiatives	Independence, responsibility, empathy	Daily chores, organizing study groups, and participating in social initiatives nurture responsibility and empathy.

Finally, the institutional routines, such as dormitory life and community engagement, further reinforce the development of essential life skills. Students are expected to manage their time effectively, contributing to dormitory chores like cleaning common areas and organizing study groups. These routine responsibilities help students develop independence, responsibility, and adaptability. Additionally, they participate in social initiatives, such as

environmental awareness programs or visiting orphanages, which cultivate empathy and social responsibility key skills for success beyond the pesantren.

These findings resonate with constructivist and student-centered learning theories, which emphasize learner engagement, collaboration, and experiential learning as foundations for skill development (Mat & Jamaludin, 2024). The learning strategies observed at An-Nursali Islamic Boarding School demonstrate how structured discussion, group activities, and habituation-based practices can facilitate the development of communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills.

Within the context of Islamic education, this supports previous studies indicating that pedagogical innovation in pesantren and Islamic schools increasingly incorporates active learning strategies to respond to contemporary educational demands (Suyatno et al., 2022). These findings suggest that skill-oriented learning strategies can be effectively embedded within pesantren education without compromising its religious and cultural foundations.

3. Institutional Culture and Hidden Curriculum in Skill Development at An-Nursali Islamic Boarding School

This study reveals that Pesantren Modern An-Nursali Binjai implements a life skills-based curriculum by integrating religious teachings, academic subjects, and pesantren-based activities. Students engage in various activities that develop social, personal, and vocational skills, such as congregational prayers, bahtsul masa'il discussions, and entrepreneurial activities. These activities not only involve formal education but also real-life practices that help students develop skills relevant to everyday life.

The life skills curriculum at the pesantren is also reflected in students' daily routines, where they learn to manage time, develop teamwork skills, and enhance leadership abilities through organizational activities and committees. Additionally, social activities such as community service and social visits teach social ethics, collaboration, and concern for the surrounding community.

The hidden curriculum at the pesantren plays a significant role in shaping students' character, instilling values of discipline, responsibility, and independence in their daily lives. Activities such as conflict management between students and discussions on social ethics that occur outside of formal lessons indirectly develop interpersonal skills, emotional regulation, and problem-solving abilities.

The findings of this study support the concept that the hidden curriculum and institutional culture play a crucial role in the development of life skills that are not explicitly taught in the formal curriculum (Amin et al., 2024). Although religious and academic teachings are the main focus, daily experiences at the pesantren, such as social activities and student interactions, provide a space for the development of important social and personal skills for real-life situations (As'ad & Hakim, 2022). This aligns with educational theories which suggest that life skills can develop through social experiences and the values communicated within institutional culture.

The integrated culture of the pesantren, combined with the hidden curriculum, demonstrates that education at the pesantren is not only focused on

theoretical knowledge but also on the development of character and practical skills. Through various social and organizational activities, students are taught to adapt to social environments and develop skills that support critical thinking, communication, and collaboration, which are highly relevant to the demands of the workplace and the increasingly complex social life

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has explored the implementation of the curriculum at Pesantren An-Nursali Islamic Boarding School, focusing on how it integrates religious education, academic learning, and character development through an integrated educational framework. The findings indicate that the curriculum is effectively implemented through structured daily routines, which incorporate both formal instruction and non-formal activities such as community service, student leadership, and religious practices. These activities play a crucial role in fostering essential life skills, including critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and leadership. The holistic approach of the pesantren ensures that students are not only academically prepared but also equipped with the values and competencies required for real-life situations.

However, there are some limitations to this study. First, the scope of the research was limited to one pesantren, and the findings may not be universally applicable to other pesantren across different regions. Additionally, the study primarily relied on qualitative data from observations and interviews, which may introduce subjectivity. Future research could expand the scope to include multiple pesantren to explore variations in curriculum implementation across different contexts. Further studies could also include quantitative data to assess the long-term impact of pesantren-based education on students' personal and professional outcomes.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

This study has several limitations, including its focus on a single pesantren, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the qualitative methods used, such as interviews and observations, may be influenced by researcher bias and participant subjectivity. The research also primarily gathered perspectives from teachers, students, and administrators, leaving out alumni or external stakeholders. Future research could expand the study to multiple pesantren, use a mixed-methods approach for more comprehensive data, and include longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of pesantren education on students' development.

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