



## Exploring the Lived Experiences of Santri Balancing Religious Education and Academic Demands in Indonesian Pesantren

Afis Baghiz Syafruddin <sup>1\*</sup>, Usep Setiawan <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>STAI DR. KH. EZ. Muttaqien Purwakarta, Indonesia

[afisbaghiz.1231@gmail.com](mailto:afisbaghiz.1231@gmail.com) \*, [usepsetiawan831@gmail.com](mailto:usepsetiawan831@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

Religious education plays a central role in shaping identity and values, particularly within pesantren, which combine traditional Islamic studies with modern academic curricula. Previous research has highlighted institutional reforms in pesantren but has not sufficiently addressed how students themselves experience and interpret the dual demands of religious devotion and academic achievement. What remains unclear is how santri negotiate these overlapping responsibilities and what meanings they attach to the process of balancing them. This study applies an interpretative phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of santri and to uncover the essence of how they construct meaning in navigating religious and academic obligations. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twenty-four participants from various types of pesantren across different regions in Indonesia, ensuring broader contextual diversity and enhancing the generalizability of the findings. The collected data were then analyzed using systematic interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The findings reveal that students perceive their educational journey as a negotiation between tension and integration, drawing resilience from spiritual practices while striving to succeed academically. Their narratives highlight both the challenges of dual obligations and the creative ways in which they harmonize different spheres of knowledge. These results demonstrate that identity formation in pesantren is dynamic, characterized by resilience, adaptation, and meaning-making rather than conflict alone. The study advances understanding of religious education by showing how lived experience provides insight into the intersection of tradition and modernity, offering both theoretical contributions and practical implications for educational policy and practice.



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### INTRODUCTION

Religious education represents a central dimension of human development, shaping not only intellectual growth but also personal identity, values, and social belonging (Barton et al., 2023). Within many Muslim-majority societies, the pesantren tradition serves as a distinctive model of education, emphasizing the study of classical Islamic texts while increasingly integrating formal academic curricula (Hidayat, 2024). This dual structure reflects broader cultural and educational transformations, as religious institutions navigate the demands of modernity without abandoning their spiritual and cultural heritage.

The phenomenon of balancing traditional religious learning with contemporary academic expectations is not limited to Indonesia but resonates with global debates on the role of faith-based education in a rapidly changing world (Ibrahim et al., 2024). For students within pesantren, this experience is not merely institutional but deeply personal, as they negotiate tensions between spiritual obligations and academic performance (Mukhlis et al. 2023). Such negotiations highlight the lived realities of young individuals who seek to embody religious devotion while also aspiring to succeed within modern educational and professional contexts.

Exploring how these students experience and interpret their dual responsibilities is crucial for advancing understanding of the human dimension of education (Kawakip, 2020). Beyond measurable outcomes such as academic achievement or institutional performance, the subjective meanings attached to these experiences shed light on resilience, identity, and the search for harmony between different spheres of knowledge (Mawardi & Ruhayah, 2022). A phenomenological approach is therefore particularly relevant, as it enables the articulation of lived experiences in ways that capture the depth of meaning and the nuances of personal interpretation that are often overlooked in quantitative or policy-driven studies.

Research on lived experience has become increasingly central in the study of education, particularly in contexts where individuals must navigate complex intersections of tradition and modernity (Mujahid, 2021). In the field of religious education, the voices of students have drawn scholarly attention as essential sources of insight into how faith-based learning is embodied, negotiated, and sustained within contemporary educational frameworks (Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Studies have demonstrated that personal narratives provide a depth of understanding that extends beyond institutional outcomes, revealing how learners experience both the burdens and the transformative potential of their educational journeys.

Despite its growing importance, the exploration of lived experience in this domain faces significant methodological challenges. Much of the existing research has relied on quantitative approaches that privilege measurable indicators such as performance scores or institutional efficiency (Nasution et al., 2024). While valuable, such methods often fail to capture the subtleties of meaning-making, the tensions between conflicting demands, or the nuanced interpretations students attach to their daily practices (Sadiah, 2022). Even qualitative studies have sometimes adopted thematic analyses that describe categories of experience without fully engaging the interpretive depth required to understand how individuals construct meaning from those experiences.

These limitations underscore the need for approaches that can access the essence of phenomena as experienced by participants themselves. Without such depth, research risks presenting only a partial view, neglecting the inner realities that shape identity, resilience, and personal growth (Sulhan & Hakim, 2023). Phenomenology, particularly interpretative phenomenological analysis, offers a pathway to address this gap by foregrounding subjectivity and allowing the voices of participants to guide the articulation of themes (Mukhlis, 2025). By situating the inquiry within this framework, the study aims to move beyond descriptive accounts toward a more profound understanding of the experiential dimensions of balancing religious and academic responsibilities.

In the context of pesantren education, most existing efforts to address the dual demands of religious and academic learning have relied on practical solutions such as curriculum integration, time management strategies, or institutional policies designed to reduce student burden (Wahyudin, 2025). While these approaches are valuable for improving structural conditions, they provide limited insight into how students themselves experience, interpret, and make meaning of these dual responsibilities in their everyday lives.

Such approaches often fail to capture the nuanced realities of tension, negotiation, and resilience that shape the identity and development of santri (Yusuf et al., 2024). Quantitative assessments and descriptive thematic analyses, though informative, tend to emphasize external outcomes rather than the internal processes through which students navigate their complex educational journeys (Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). As a result, the subjective voices of students remain underrepresented in the literature, leaving an incomplete understanding of the phenomenon.

To address this gap, phenomenology offers a more holistic and interpretative pathway for inquiry (Al-Bashayreh et al., 2022). By focusing on the lived experience and the meaning-making of participants, it enables a deeper exploration of how santri reconcile religious devotion with modern academic expectations (Nashuddin, 2020). This perspective moves beyond surface-level descriptions to uncover the essence of the phenomenon as it is lived, thereby contributing to both theoretical knowledge and practical insights into religious education in contemporary contexts.

Previous research in religious education has highlighted the importance of exploring how students experience the tension between tradition and modernity. Studies in pesantren contexts have shown that institutional reforms and integrated curricula can support students in meeting academic requirements while maintaining religious practices (Bergmark, 2023). However, these works often stop at describing institutional dynamics rather than uncovering the personal meanings students attach to their experiences. Phenomenological studies in other fields have demonstrated the value of focusing on subjective narratives, showing how lived experience offers deeper insights into human resilience and identity formation (Mukhlis et al. 2025). Building on these foundations, this study turns directly to the voices of santri to understand how they live through and interpret their dual responsibilities.

To address the limitations of previous approaches, this article adopts interpretative phenomenological analysis as its guiding method. This approach is suited to capture both the descriptive and interpretive dimensions of lived experience, enabling the articulation of meaning as participants understand it (Estrada-Araoz et al., 2023). By applying this method, the study responds to the knowledge gap identified earlier: the lack of attention to how santri themselves perceive and negotiate the dual demands of religious and academic learning (França et al., 2023). The method allows themes to emerge inductively from the narratives, ensuring that the findings remain closely tied to participants' own accounts. In doing so, it provides a richer and more holistic picture of the phenomenon under study.

This article is organized into several sections that reflect the flow of phenomenological inquiry. The introduction situates the phenomenon within broader educational and cultural debates. The methodological section outlines the phenomenological approach and explains data collection and analysis procedures. The results section presents themes supported by narrative accounts, while the discussion interprets these themes in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the key findings and highlights their implications for religious education and future research.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study employed a phenomenological design, specifically an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), to explore the lived experiences of santri in balancing traditional religious education with modern academic demands (Giota & Gustafsson, 2020). Phenomenology was selected because of its focus on uncovering the subjective meanings embedded within participants' narratives, allowing a deep understanding of how individuals make sense of complex personal and social realities. The interpretative orientation of IPA was considered particularly relevant, as it emphasizes both the descriptive and interpretive dimensions of experience, enabling the articulation of tensions, negotiations, and harmonies within the phenomenon under investigation.

### **Participants**

Participants were santri enrolled in pesantren institutions that integrate both traditional Islamic studies and formal academic curricula. Purposive sampling was applied to ensure that individuals included had direct and sustained experience with the phenomenon of balancing dual educational responsibilities (Grimmond et al., 2020). The inclusion criteria required participants to be actively engaged in both religious and academic study programs, aged between 16 and 22 years, and willing to share their experiences in depth. Exclusion criteria involved students who were only engaged in religious studies without academic schooling, or conversely, students who pursued only formal academics without pesantren affiliation. The final group consisted of 12 participants, balanced in gender distribution, with an average age of 18.7 years. These demographic characteristics provided sufficient variation to capture the breadth of lived experiences while maintaining a coherent focus on the phenomenon.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face in private and comfortable settings within the pesantren environment (Holland et al., 2021). An interview guide was employed to ensure consistency across sessions while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences in their own words. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Field notes were taken to capture contextual details and nonverbal cues. The interviews were conducted in the participants' native language to ensure authentic expression, and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Care was taken to establish rapport and minimize power dynamics, allowing participants to speak freely and reflectively about their lived experiences.

### Data Analysis

The data were analyzed following the systematic procedures of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Transcripts were read repeatedly to ensure immersion, followed by the identification of meaning units that captured significant statements related to the phenomenon. These units were coded and clustered into emergent themes, which were then examined for patterns of convergence and divergence across participants (Jiang et al., 2021). Reductive and interpretative processes were employed to distill essential meanings while preserving the richness of individual accounts. Qualitative data analysis software (NVivo 12) was utilized to support the organization and retrieval of codes, although the interpretive decisions were grounded in the phenomenological framework. The iterative process of analysis allowed the articulation of both shared and unique dimensions of experience, culminating in the identification of essential themes that represented the phenomenon as a whole.

## RESULTS

### Living Between Two Worlds of Knowledge

Santri consistently described their life as an ongoing negotiation between the world of classical Islamic texts and the requirements of national academic curricula. For many, the pesantren was not only a place of religious formation but also a space where they were expected to excel academically in secular subjects.

One participant reflected:

“Every night, I study the kitab until after midnight, but in the morning I must also prepare for mathematics and science tests. Sometimes I feel torn—if I focus too much on school, I fear neglecting my religious duties.”

This tension highlights how participants experience their learning environments as overlapping yet competing spheres of knowledge, where prioritization is often difficult.

To enhance clarity, the key patterns of participants' experiences are summarized in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Summary of Key Themes in Santri Experiences

Theme	Description	Illustrative Quote
Negotiating Dual Demands	Balancing religious study and academic coursework	“I study kitab until midnight, then prepare for school exams in the morning.”
Spiritual Resilience	Religious practice strengthens academic endurance	“When I feel tired, I return to prayer—it gives me energy.”
Identity Integration	Combining Islamic identity with modern aspirations	“I want to study science abroad but still be known as

		a santri.”
Harmony of Knowledge	Seeing religion and science as complementary	“Studying biology deepens my faith in God.”

**Spiritual Discipline as a Source of Resilience**

Despite the challenges, participants emphasized that their religious practices provided a source of strength in coping with academic pressures. Daily rituals such as congregational prayers, dhikr, and recitation of the Qur’an were perceived as grounding experiences that nurtured resilience.

One student shared:

“When I feel tired and overwhelmed, I return to prayer. It reminds me why I am here, and it gives me energy to continue. Without my religious practice, I think I would collapse under the pressure.”

This suggests that spiritual discipline functions not merely as an obligation but as an existential anchor that enables participants to face the dual demands of pesantren life.

In visual terms, Figure 1 below illustrates how spiritual practices support academic persistence.

**Figure 1.** Relationship Between Spiritual Discipline and Academic Resilience



**Negotiating Identity and Modern Aspirations**

Participants frequently described themselves as individuals navigating between a traditional identity rooted in Islamic heritage and aspirations shaped by modern academic opportunities. They expressed pride in being part of the pesantren tradition while also aspiring to compete with peers outside the pesantren system in universities or careers.

As one participant explained:

“I want to continue my study abroad, maybe in science or technology. But I also want to remain known as a santri. Sometimes I feel like I am carrying two identities at the same time.”

This illustrates how participants interpret their dual roles not as contradictions but as part of an evolving self-identity, merging religious commitment with future-oriented goals.

**Experiencing Harmony Through Integration**

While many accounts focused on struggle, several participants described moments of harmony when they discovered that religious learning and academic subjects could complement one another. For example, critical thinking skills developed in the study of fiqh were perceived as transferable to modern disciplines, while scientific learning was often framed within a worldview of divine wisdom.

A participant reflected:

“When I study biology, I see the greatness of God in creation. It makes my faith stronger. So, for me, science and religion do not have to fight—they can walk together.”

This theme reveals an emerging integrative perspective where knowledge domains are not seen as separate but as mutually reinforcing pathways toward intellectual and spiritual maturity.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study revealed that santri experience their educational journey as a continuous negotiation between religious devotion and academic achievement (Knoster & Goodboy, 2020). The findings highlight that meaning is created not only through tension and struggle but also through moments of harmony, addressing the central question of how students interpret the dual demands of tradition and modernity.

### **Contribution of Findings to the Research Question**

The results directly respond to the research question by showing that the lived experiences of santri are shaped by the interplay between challenge and resilience (Chye et al., 2024). Participants demonstrated that their sense of identity is neither fragmented nor polarized; instead, it evolves through an ongoing process of reconciling two spheres of knowledge (Kwarikunda et al., 2022). This interpretation offers a novel perspective by framing the negotiation not merely as a burden but as a form of growth that strengthens both spiritual commitment and academic aspiration. In doing so, the study advances understanding of how young Muslims reinterpret traditional education within the realities of contemporary life (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023). Such insights would not have been accessible through purely quantitative measures, underscoring the value of phenomenology in uncovering the essence of subjective experience.

### **Relation to Previous Literature and Theory**

The findings resonate with earlier work that emphasizes the role of religious practice in fostering resilience among students, while extending this understanding by showing how resilience is lived out in the context of dual educational obligations (Núñez-Regueiro et al., 2024). They also align with Romito et al. (2020), who noted the growing integration of faith and modern academic learning, but this study contributes further by highlighting how integration is perceived and enacted by students themselves, rather than by institutions. In contrast to thematic studies that offer descriptive categorizations, the interpretative focus here demonstrates how santri actively construct meaning from their experiences, reflecting Karim et al. (2025) assertion that phenomenology allows for deeper insight into human identity formation. By connecting these narratives to broader theoretical discussions on identity and modernity, the study shows that the pesantren context is not static but dynamically shaped by students' lived interpretations of their roles and responsibilities (Mukhlis et al., 2024).

### **Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study carry important implications for both educational practice and the broader understanding of religious education in contemporary society (Mustofa et al., 2024). On a social level, they illustrate how young Muslims reinterpret traditional frameworks in ways that maintain religious devotion while embracing modern academic pursuits. Culturally, the narratives highlight that pesantren are not static institutions but dynamic spaces where tradition and modernity coexist through the agency of students (Mukhlis, 2025a). For educators and policymakers, these insights suggest that supporting santri requires not only structural reforms but also an acknowledgment of the subjective meanings attached to their dual commitments (Lee et al., 2022). By emphasizing resilience, negotiation, and integration as lived realities, the study provides a framework for designing educational approaches that honor both spiritual formation and academic excellence.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Several limitations should be acknowledged in interpreting these findings. First, the study relied on a relatively small sample of santri from specific pesantren contexts, which may limit the transferability of results to other institutions or cultural settings (Tohari et al., 2024). Second, as with most phenomenological research, the findings are based on participants' subjective accounts and interpretations, which cannot be generalized statistically. Finally, the focus on interpretative

phenomenological analysis emphasizes depth over breadth, meaning that broader structural or institutional dimensions were not fully explored (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulfaidah, et al., 2025). These limitations, however, are consistent with the phenomenological commitment to prioritizing lived experience, and they point to opportunities for further investigation.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Future studies could expand on these findings by including a more diverse range of pesantren contexts, particularly across regions or cultural traditions, to examine whether similar patterns of negotiation and integration emerge (Zuhri & Sibaweh, 2023). Comparative research with other faith-based educational systems may also shed light on how students in different traditions navigate the intersection of religious and academic obligations. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insight into how the process of balancing tradition and modernity evolves over time, particularly as santri transition into higher education or professional roles (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). Such extensions would not only enrich theoretical understanding but also offer practical contributions for educators, policymakers, and communities seeking to sustain meaningful models of religious education in modern societies.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the lived experiences of santri in balancing traditional religious education with modern academic demands, addressing the central problem of how students interpret and negotiate dual responsibilities. The findings revealed that their journeys are marked by tension and struggle, yet also by resilience and harmony that strengthen both spiritual devotion and academic aspirations. By highlighting these subjective narratives, the study fills a gap left by earlier research that emphasized institutional or quantitative perspectives while overlooking personal meaning-making. The use of interpretative phenomenological analysis provided a deeper understanding of how students construct identity and integrate tradition with modernity. These insights contribute to both theoretical discussions on religious education and practical efforts to design supportive learning environments. Future research could expand this work by comparing different educational contexts or examining how these experiences evolve over time.

### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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