

Innovative Strategies for Islamic Religious Education: *Pesantren Day* for Life Skill Development

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ABSTRACT

Life skills education is essential in shaping students' character, confirming their roles as servants of God and stewards (*khalifah*) on earth. Embedding life skills into formal school curricula is necessary to nurture holistic human development grounded in Islamic values. This qualitative study, utilizing a phenomenological approach, was conducted at MI Unggul Sabilillah to explore the implementation of life skills education and identify supporting and inhibiting factors. Data were gathered through interviews, observations, and documentation to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The findings indicate that life skills education at MI Unggul Sabilillah is integrated through the innovative *Pesantren Day* program. This initiative includes structured, systematic activities aimed at developing student independence. These activities cultivate essential life competencies such as decision-making, interpersonal communication, self-awareness, mutual respect, discipline, self-regulation, confidence, and active participation. Students also demonstrate the ability to articulate ideas, think critically, understand religious teachings deeply, and exhibit leadership qualities. The consistent implementation of these programs is driven by the vision and philosophy of the madrasah's founders. Teacher expertise and commitment further enhance the effectiveness of life skills training. Continuous evaluation ensures that the programs remain effective and aligned with the school's educational goals.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Technological advancements have significantly transformed various aspects of human life, including the education sector (Alfawareh & Jusoh, 2017). In a globalized society, life skills have become essential for students to thrive, adapt, and compete effectively (Salian & Kumar, 2023). As the world becomes increasingly complex and digitally driven, equipping students with relevant life skills through school-based curricula is crucial to nurturing individuals capable of navigating modern challenges (Tabish & Geelani, 2023).

An innovative and contextually grounded curriculum that incorporates both local wisdom and global competencies plays a pivotal role in cultivating these skills (Musi et al., 2022; Safrudin & Wijaya, 2024). Life skills education empowers students with decision-making capabilities, creativity, emotional regulation, communication, empathy, and stress management strategies (WHO, 1999; Salian & Kumar, 2023; Yadav & Iqbal, 2009).

However, students today face growing challenges influenced by uncensored media content, including violence, explicit language, and inappropriate behavior, which can be accessed across various platforms—from social media to television and even within their environments (Ngafifi, 2014). This exposure, without adequate life skills and moral grounding, puts students at risk.

Schools, despite being institutions for character formation and human development, often fall short of achieving holistic education. The current education system tends to prioritize cognitive achievements while neglecting affective, psychomotor, and spiritual dimensions (Sönmez, 2017). As a result, many students graduate without the readiness to face real-world challenges or adhere to societal values and norms.

While Indonesia's education system possesses strengths, it frequently overlooks life skills, making education less effective in producing independent and resilient individuals (Sarbiran, 2002; WHO, 1999). The need for life skills becomes even more pressing when considering that 53% of high school graduates do not continue to higher education (Rostini et al., 2023).

Life skills extend beyond academic knowledge. They encompass personal, social, cognitive, and vocational competencies essential for independent living and problem-solving (Cahyono, 2022; Gunawan et al., 2020). These skills also contribute significantly to an individual's success in their personal and professional life (Jusmirad et al., 2023). Therefore, educators must integrate life skills into the learning process, grounded in real-life contexts, to prepare students for meaningful participation in society (Das & Hazarika, 2023).

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) seeks to teach its students to be able to carry out the mandate of life from Allah by creating a life that is *rahmatan lil alamin* and can carry out their duties as a caliph on earth as well as a servant. From several studies conducted by experts, it is shown that PAI held in schools in Indonesia generally has the same problem, namely the lack of methodology in learning so that it is less interesting to learn about Islam itself (Salim, 2023), (Amaly, Herdiana, Ruswandi, & Arifin, 2023). Innovation is needed in Islamic religious education in order to achieve the goal of Islamic religious education, which is to essentially prepare a complete human being (*insan kamil*) (Fathurrohman, Arif, & Sirait, 2023). Thus, the innovation of the Islamic religious education curriculum is aimed at equipping the needs of students in the present, who will come in facing the challenges of life independently, intelligently, critically, rationally, and creatively (Indrasutanto, 2017).

Education must always be updated or innovated, considering that education is a human activity that is carried out from birth to burial. Innovation is not only a new idea, practice, or object, but also different from the previous one or another. Innovation becomes a differentiator which then becomes an added value (value added). The goal of learning innovation is to help students become better personally, understand and analyze information, be successful and moral in carrying out their daily activities, and contribute and handle their lives in a positive way (Saputro, 2021) (Smith, 1973). However, there is no evidence in the field to show that education as a whole prioritizes the development of students' life skills as a curriculum innovation.

Research on life skills has been carried out by many previous researchers, for example (Eko Cahyono, 2022), which focuses on life skills education in the learning process and extracurricular, the importance of life skills education in education (Tabish & Geelani, 2023), Life Skills Training for Students (Jusmirad et al., 2023), improvement of the Competency-Based Curriculum (KBK) with life skills complements (life skill) through a broad-based approach to education (Broad Based Education) (Indrasutanto, 2017). Many studies have not specifically been carried out to conduct an in-depth study of Islamic education curriculum innovations in the context of improving life skills for students. Curriculum innovation is a fundamental need for the formation of a learning climate that encourages students as mandated by

national education (Julaeha, Hadiana, & Zaqiah, 2021). Thus, this study aims to analyze the innovation of Islamic religious education carried out by Mi Unggulan Sabilillah Lamongan with the Islamic Boarding School Day program and its activities in fostering life skills for students to be able to be an alternative and have an impact on the curriculum innovation for schools, students, policymakers, other researchers on the same theme and parties interested in education.

2. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach that consists of data collection and analysis to understand the phenomenon. Qualitative data consists of interviews, documentation, and observations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), (Patton, 2002). The design of this study uses a transformative design, supported by a data collection form, to understand the problem from the research results fully.

The subject of this study is the number of students and teachers from grade 6 in Mi Unggulan Sabilillah Lamongan, East Java, Indonesia. Curriculum innovation in madrasah institutions through the "Pesantren Day" program with various structured activities carried out outside of learning hours. To get the results of triangulation of data sources from students and teachers, the research instrument uses interview forms, observations, and documentation to explore the benefits and impacts of curriculum innovation for students and teachers. The interviews conducted by the researcher on the subjects were 5 teachers and 10 grade 6 students of Mi Unggulan Sabilillah Lamongan, East Java, Indonesia. The observation made by the researcher in the implementation of "Pesantren Day" is a method of observing the phenomenon that exists directly.

Observations show what events, behaviors, and activities are and confirmed by the results of research so that it is clearer in receiving and getting an overview of events or can be done in recording and documentation. Other photo documentation is done directly by looking at existing documents such as books, grades, notes, etc. Documentation is used as data validation. Furthermore, documentation is useful as a collection of data where the data is a record.

The data analysis technique used by the researcher, the model (Miles et al. 2018) data analysis in qualitative research, is carried out when data collection takes place, and after completing data collection within a certain period. The phase of data collecting. Comprising the selection process known as "data reduction," which aims to streamline and transform unprocessed data obtained from written field records. Since data collecting starts with summaries, coding, topic analysis, cluster creation, memo writing, and other activities, reduction is carried out with the goal of eliminating unnecessary data. Data presentation is completed next. The next stage is to provide descriptions of various structured data sets that allow for inference and action. Texts with narrative structures are used to present qualitative data. The procedures for examining interactive model data are briefly described in the figure.1

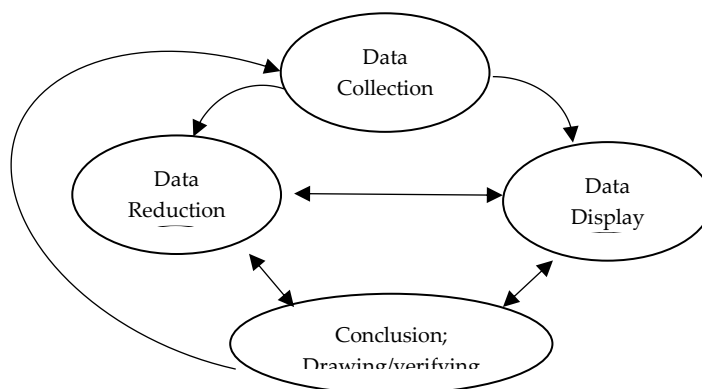


Figure 1. Data Analysis Interactive Model

In order to verify the accuracy of the data, the data analysis findings are also verified. To ensure that the data received fits the problem being investigated, the triangulation method - either source or technical triangulation - is employed as a verification technique.

In this study, data collected from informants, including students and teachers of grade 6 in MI Unggulan Sabilillah Lamongan, East Java, Indonesia were recorded in detail and thoroughly. Then, the results of the notes are summarized and focused on important things so that the results of data reduction provide a clear picture to make it easier to describe conclusions. After the reduction process, the data is presented in the form of short descriptions and the like. The data presented draws conclusions and verifications. In this study, conclusions and verification will be presented in the form of narrative texts explaining the research results.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Pesantren Day as an innovation of the Islamic Religious Education curriculum

In developed countries, efforts to teach life skills are carried out by the government in schools in a systematic, planned, and very well-managed manner. Even the community participates in life skills education. Life skills teach not just to know, but to understand and reflect in daily behavior. Life skills consist of the knowledge, attitudes, and values needed by a person to live independently and with dignity in carrying out life (Eko Cahyono, 2022).

Pesantren Day is an innovation of the Islamic Religious Education curriculum at MI Unggulan Sabilillah Lamongan with a Boarding School system to develop life skills education. Boarding school is a "sekolah asrama", it can also be interpreted as a school with a dormitory (Suntara, Budimansyah, & Komalasari, 2019). The dormitory itself is a boarding house for students, where students learn in total in the school environment. The management of Pesantren Day is an adaptation of the Boarding School as an implementation of life skill development so that students who live together at school for a while by turn the classroom into a temporary dormitory. Pesantren Day at MI Unggulan Sabilillah Lamongan is held for 2-3 nights on Friday-Sunday every 2 weeks for 1 semester as an effort to improve students' life skills, especially in the field of Islam and language.

This is in contrast to the definition of pesantren in general, which tends to last for a long time. During pesantren day at Mi Unggulan Sabilillah, the dormitory is used to facilitate the implementation of programs and activities that are arranged. Dormitories are used to shape students through independent experiences with a deliberate and planned environment. Cultural formation is another part of the madrasah to instill life skills in students. These cultures include; discipline, neat queues, independence, cooperation, mutual respect, decision-making, critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-improvement. With the culture that is programmed during pesantren day activities, students have the opportunity to learn independently and grow in the students of that culture in the process of interaction with other students during the activity.

Through the environment and culture created by the madrasah in the dormitory system, students get independent learning life skills. Although its implementation has experienced several obstacles, with the planning, commitment, and competence of teachers supported by parents, the success of creating an environment and culture in the pesantren day program as a form of life skills can run well. This was shown by Tabish and Geelani (Tabish & Geelani, 2023). Life skills help in communicating effectively, empathizing with others, thinking objectively and creatively to solve problems, coping with stress, and helping in building a positive attitude, relationships, and self-awareness. Skills are generally identified as thinking skills, which involve skills related to thinking, and social skills, which help us deal effectively with others.

3.2 Pesantren Day fosters students' life skills

In Pesantren Day activities, children are trained in independence to bring out their potential and talent interests through systematic activities. Independence is meant to be the ability to make and execute important decisions by oneself, without any outward guidance of responsibility and the willingness to answer the consequences of one's actions and the belief that such behavior is practical, socially possible, and morally correct (Kon, 1989). "Independence" comes from the word "autonomy", which means a state in which a person has confidence and does not depend on others to make decisions. According to Steinberg, independence is a person's ability to control themselves. The three main dimensions of psychosocial independence consist of: First, emotional autonomy which is related to changes in the closeness or attachment of an individual's emotional relationships, especially with parents. The second dimension is behavioral autonomy, which relates to the ability to make decisions freely and follow them. The third dimension is values autonomy, which relates to the freedom to understand various principles about right and wrong or important and unimportant. The development of psychological, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and resilience abilities to deal with day-to-day obstacles and engage in constructive community engagement has been shown to need life skills (Nasheeda, Abdullah, Krauss, & Ahmed, 2019).

"In the pesantren day activities, teachers are as facilitators for students in carrying out the activities that have been prepared. We have prepared these activities so that they carry out independently, unlike when they are at home. It is hoped that this independence will help students develop planned life skills.

R.1

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Independence as a life skill for students, MI Unggulan Sabilillah Lamongan is internalized in the "Pesantren Day" program which is held every 2 weeks for 1 semester, with various activities that support mainly in improving students' life skills in the field of Islam and language. By providing life skills at school, students are expected to learn independently little by little, interact with others, recognize their potential and actualize it, work, and be able to appreciate others well (Prajapati, Sharma, & Sharma, 2016). With various positive life skills lessons, students become more active, independent, and confident (Khairiyah, 2020), (Defitrika & Mahmudah, 2021). Another lesson that can be learned is to inspire students to discover their strengths and talents in life so that they are able to increasing their potential and become more confident.

In the introduction of the potential advantages of each student, stimulants are given by the teacher as a facilitator with the teacher's expertise. The stimulant is intended to spark hidden interests and talents due to a lack of confidence so that they can be explored naturally from students. Through the talent show activities prepared on the pesantren day, the emergence of potential that students are interested in can be known and convinced with simple awards in the form of appreciation

The research findings indicate that the activities within the *Pesantren Day Program* at MI Unggulan Sabilillah Lamongan are strategically designed to enhance students' life skills. These activities, as documented in the program schedule, include personal routines, group-based initiatives, language demonstrations, yellow book (kitab kuning) reading sessions, *muhadhoroh* (public speaking), artistic

expression, *ubudiyah* (worship) practices, and physical education. These components reflect a holistic approach to life skills education by incorporating spiritual, social, cognitive, and physical development. The integration of life skills within various structured activities—such as sports and behavioral interventions—aligns with broader educational practices that target positive youth development (Jones & Lavalley, 2009).

Personal activities like eating, praying, bathing, and sleeping independently alongside peers—without parental assistance—are particularly aimed at nurturing students' independence, responsibility, and discipline. These routines are essential in supporting individual development, especially in cultivating social competence and self-reliance (Pangestu, Saparahayuningsih, & D, 2017). An independent mindset empowers students to feel a greater sense of agency and self-control, which reduces their vulnerability to negative external influences such as excessive gadget use or harmful environmental factors (Irhamna, Mardiana, Putro, & Na'imah, 2022).

"Children at home are still dependent on their parents, in this pesantren day program, we intend to train them to be independent at least in daily activities such as eating, bathing, wearing clothes, cleaning rooms, preparing equipment, preparing for activities." R.1

3.3 Life skills are grown through various systematic activity programs

As a result of observation records, the Pesantren Day program carried out Arabic and English language demonstration activities. In the morning each child pairs up to communicate in Arabic and English according to the vocabulary they know. Arabic, and English demonstration activities, are aimed at training students to think critically, practice communication and interaction, increase creativity, confidence, open insights and minds, and the courage to express ideas (Daif-Allah & Al-Sultan, 2023), and can be a provision for students to master foreign languages as a need for the development of the times (Gupta, 2022). Communication is a skill of 21st century society in order to become a global society (Niket & Suparna, 2018).

"In the current era, students need language as a provision for communication between countries. We try to foster a love for foreign languages so that in the future they will be familiar with these languages and become their communication tools." R.2

In this study, it was found that activities in the Pesantren Day program are an innovation in the curriculum to strengthen life skills is reading the yellow book *"turost"* and its meaning. The activity introduced and taught the yellow book with simple concepts that students could understand and master with the method of memorizing *"nadhoman"* and the lecture method. The purpose of the activity is for students to learn more about Islamic knowledge with various topics that are adapted to the age of the child. Understanding the holy book, the old book *"turost"* in Arabic equips students to be able to apply it in daily life. Understanding the correct interpretation provides a basis for students to avoid errors in the interpretation of the text (Albert Nida, 2009).

Another finding is in the observation of Pesantren Day activities, namely Muhadhoroh (Public Speaking) activities and art creations with Islamic themes. Some activities such as; hosts, 3-language elections (Arabic, English, and Indonesian), poetry, stand-up comedy, Islamic dance, and other performances were carried out in a fun way so that students were enthusiastically involved in the activity. The purpose of public speaking is to increase students' confidence, be able to convey ideas and ideas about the messages of the Al Quran and hadith, improve self-quality, be able to think critically, and be able to improve leadership skills (Kuntoro et al., 2022), (Wahyuni Ibrahim & Shahabani, 2020), (Hidayanti, 2023).

3.4 Instilling spiritual values through curriculum innovation for the *pesantren* day

The spiritual aspect of students is part of the *Pesantren Day* activities with the implementation of *Ubudiah* such as *qiyamul lail* (night prayer), *tadarrus* Al Quran, mandatory and *sunnah* prayers, and *muhasabah*.

"In the third of the night, we teach students to habituate Qiyamul lail by carrying out sunnah prayers and reciting the Qur'an. This aims to improve students' religious character, increase awareness of the importance of worship, strengthen spiritual relationships with Allah, and help improve students' quality of life." R2.

The habituation of moral values through the implementation of *ubudiyah* (worship) activities plays a central role in supporting students' life skills development. These practices foster decision-making abilities, emotional independence, and personal discipline in alignment with Islamic teachings and universally accepted positive norms. By consistently engaging in acts of worship, students internalize religious values that shape their behavior and help them navigate the social and moral challenges of daily life (Mislaini, 2017). Within this framework, worship is not only a religious obligation but also a vehicle for cultivating moral autonomy—empowering students to apply these values in real-world contexts.

Based on the analysis of various research documents, this study identified several key supporting factors that enhance the implementation of Islamic Religious Education and the *Pesantren Day* program for life skills development at MI Unggulan Sabilillah Lamongan.

The *Pesantren Day* program is deeply rooted in the school's vision: "Superior, Quality, and Moral Karimah." This vision reflects the founders' commitment to nurturing students who excel academically while embodying noble character. The philosophical foundation of the madrasah serves as a guiding force for both educators and students, creating an educational atmosphere that prioritizes ethical development alongside intellectual growth. These institutional values are systematically internalized through daily activities, providing a moral compass that supports life skills acquisition.

The success of the *Pesantren Day* program is strongly influenced by the involvement of skilled and knowledgeable teachers. The madrasah employs eleven expert educators, each with specialized competencies, including foreign language instruction, *turost* (yellow book) literacy, public speaking, and Islamic preaching (*da'wah*). These teachers play a critical role in mentoring students and facilitating skill development in areas that foster resilience, adaptability, and communication. Their expertise ensures that students receive structured, high-quality guidance during the program.

Curriculum innovation through the *Pesantren Day* program is further supported by the availability of comprehensive infrastructure. The madrasah provides a conducive learning environment equipped with spacious playgrounds, a mosque for spiritual development, meeting halls, motivational displays, child-friendly classrooms with appropriate educational tools, and adequate sanitation facilities. These physical resources significantly enhance the program's effectiveness by enabling diverse learning experiences and promoting student engagement (Suban & Ilham, 2023).

In conclusion, the implementation of *ubudiyah*-centered moral habituation, supported by a clear educational philosophy, qualified teaching staff, and strong infrastructure, demonstrates a comprehensive approach to life skills education. The *Pesantren Day* program at MI Unggulan Sabilillah Lamongan serves as a model for integrating Islamic values into practical skill development, preparing students to lead ethical and capable lives in an increasingly complex world.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the importance of curriculum innovation in positioning schools as agents of transformative education, particularly in the development of students' life skills.

The Pesantren Day program at MI Unggulan Sabilillah Lamongan serves as a model for Islamic Religious Education curriculum innovation, offering a structured and systematic series of activities—including personal care routines, language demonstrations, religious practices, public speaking, and sports—that foster both generic and specific life skills. These activities are carefully designed and continuously evaluated to ensure that students internalize essential competencies such as independence, discipline, communication, and critical thinking, which prepare them for real-world engagement. However, the study is limited in scope, focusing solely on the implementation of life skills education within the school environment. It does not address how these skills are applied or reinforced within the family or community context. Future research should explore the broader implications of life skills education, particularly how these school-based initiatives influence students' behavior and adaptability at home and in their social environments. Such research would provide a more holistic understanding of the effectiveness and sustainability of curriculum-based life skills programs.

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