



Cultivating Early-Age Independence in Indonesian Islamic Boarding Schools: A Case Study from *Pesantren Mambaul Hisan*

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Abstract

The development of independence among early-age Santri in Indonesian Islamic boarding schools presents a unique educational challenge due to their young age and reliance on adult supervision. This study investigated how structured pedagogical strategies – modeling, mentoring, and motivation – were employed to cultivate independence among 5- to 6-year-old students at Pesantren Mambaul Hisan (Mamhis). Using a qualitative case study design with interviews and field observations, the research revealed a systematic transition to self-reliance facilitated by three core strategies: direct exemplification, guided assistance, and motivational reinforcement. The novelty of this study resided in its exploration of these strategies within the context of residential Islamic education, a domain that was infrequently examined in early childhood research. The findings showed that age-based admission policies, combined with consistent scaffolding, gradually empower Santri to manage daily responsibilities while aligning with religious and cultural values. Theoretically, the study extends ecological systems and self-determination perspectives into pesantren education. Practically, it offers information to policy makers and educators in designing caretaker training and integrating independence building into character education. Despite its limited scope, this study highlights pesantren as a culturally grounded model for fostering early independence and calls for comparative and longitudinal research to broaden understanding.

A. Introduction

Despite the growing global emphasis on character education, self-regulation, and lifelong learning competencies, many young children continue to experience difficulties performing basic daily responsibilities without adult assistance. This paradox has become increasingly significant in early childhood education, where independence is expected to serve as a foundation for adaptive competence, resilience, and responsible citizenship in rapidly changing social environments (Nazarullail & Maskulin, 2022; Wood et al., 2018). Independence is widely recognized as a fundamental dimension of human development, shaping individuals who are creative, resilient, and confident across the life course (Siregar & Pratiwi, 2017).

For young children enrolled in residential educational institutions such as Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), independence becomes not merely a developmental goal but a practical necessity. Living apart from parents for extended periods requires children—referred to as *santri*—to manage daily routines, personal hygiene, and social responsibilities with minimal parental assistance (Hasan et al., 2025; Junaedi et al., 2025; Martin et al., 2021). However, cultivating independence at an early age remains a complex challenge, often requiring coordinated efforts among parents, educators, and policymakers (Mustofa et al., 2024; Lestari & Kusdinar, 2019). Children who are excessively dependent on parental support frequently exhibit anxiety, shyness, disengagement from learning, and limited participation in play activities, conditions often associated with parental overprotection, inadequate institutional facilities, and weak parent-school partnerships (Fadlillah et al., 2020; Insani et al., 2021; Wuryandani et al., 2016). These challenges suggest that independence is not merely an individual attribute acquired through maturation, but a developmental outcome shaped by interactions between children and their surrounding social, educational, and cultural environments.

Understanding how independence develops therefore requires attention not only to children's individual capacities but also to the multiple environments that shape their everyday experiences. Ecological systems theory explains how development unfolds through interactions across interconnected systems, including the *microsystem* of daily interactions, the *mesosystem* linking family and educational institutions, and the *macrosystem* of cultural and religious values (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Complementing this perspective, self-determination theory emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness as essential psychological needs underpinning independent behavior (Ryan &

Deci, 2000). Within *pesantren* settings, these theoretical constructs intersect in distinctive ways: children are immersed in structured daily routines, guided by caregivers, and socialized within religious and communal norms that shape their sense of responsibility. Indicators of independence in this context include task management, self-discipline in religious activities, and collaborative problem-solving within communal life. Although *pesantren* are widely known for their structured routines and communal discipline, existing research has rarely examined the specific pedagogical strategies through which autonomy and responsibility are cultivated in early childhood within religious-based residential institutions (Khoiruddin & Susiati, 2020).

International scholarship consistently underscores the importance of independence in early childhood education. Educational frameworks in Finland and Greece emphasize skill acquisition and autonomous learning as core developmental outcomes (Koivula et al., 2017), while curricula in Sweden and New Zealand promote exploration and outdoor play to strengthen children's autonomy (Westberg, 2019). These global practices illustrate diverse pathways for cultivating independence in young learners (Silranti & Yaswinda, 2019). Moreover, studies integrating religious values into early childhood education demonstrate that spiritually grounded environments can significantly enhance autonomy and self-reliance (Rekan et al., 2025; Abdullah & Abdullah, 2018). Nevertheless, most of these studies focus on formal schooling or family-based contexts, providing limited insight into how independence is cultivated within residential educational environments such as *pesantren*, which remain underrepresented in international discourse.

Existing research on childhood independence predominantly centers on home and conventional school environments, highlighting parental roles, curricular design, and play-based pedagogies. Democratic parenting has been shown to foster emotional stability and autonomous behavior (Lestari & Kusdinar, 2019; Sulistianah & Tohir, 2020; Sunarty & Dirawan, 2015; Umairoh & Ichsan, 2018), while educators promote independence through storytelling, habituation, modeling, and experiential activities such as Montessori-based learning, market-day programs, and structured games (Farantika & Indrawati, 2021; Ismayyah et al., 2022; Koivula et al., 2017; Masitah et al., 2023). Although these approaches provide valuable insights, they do not fully capture the dynamics of independence formation in residential religious institutions, where children are embedded in communal living arrangements governed by moral and spiritual obligations.

Pesantren represent a unique educational model that integrates cognitive learning, self-regulation, communal discipline, and religious practice within a residential setting. Research has acknowledged *pesantren*'s role in moral and character education (Hamdanah et al., 2025; Mutammam et al., 2024; Anam et al., 2019; Bashori, 1995), as well as their institutional capacity to foster discipline and responsibility through structured routines and communal engagement (Anggadwita et al., 2021; Saputra et al., 2021). However, existing studies provide limited explanation regarding the pedagogical mechanisms through which these institutional characteristics are transformed into sustained independent behavior among very young *santri*. While *pesantren* require children to manage time, fulfill religious duties, and participate in collective activities, the processes through which structured routines, caregiver guidance, and value internalization interact to cultivate independence remain insufficiently understood (Othman & Masum, 2017; Snaebjornsson et al., 2015).

This limitation is particularly evident in studies focusing on early-age *santri*. Although previous research has explored psychosocial development and moral education within *pesantren* contexts (Hamdanah et al., 2025; Khoiruddin & Susiati, 2020), limited attention has been given to understanding how structured routines, caregiver scaffolding, and religious-cultural values operate as interconnected mechanisms for fostering independence during early childhood. Moreover, the ways in which *pesantren* balance cognitive, physical-motor, spiritual, moral, and social-emotional development within communal living arrangements remain under-theorized (Putri et al., 2024; Anam et al., 2019; Mahieu & Van Caudenberg, 2020). As global education systems increasingly emphasize character education and holistic development, a deeper understanding of how independence is systematically cultivated within residential religious education becomes both theoretically and practically significant.

Addressing these gaps, the present study examines how independence is cultivated among early-age *santri* within a residential Islamic educational environment. Rather than viewing independence solely as an individual developmental outcome, this study conceptualizes it as a socially, culturally, and spiritually mediated process shaped through everyday interactions, institutional routines, and caregiver support. The novelty of this research lies in its analysis of how structured routines, caregiver guidance, and motivational reinforcement are embedded within daily *pesantren* life to foster independence among children aged five to six years. By conceptualizing *pesantren* as a

socio-cultural ecology in which structured routines, caregiver guidance, and religious-cultural values interact to cultivate independent behavior, this study extends existing discussions of childhood independence beyond dominant family-centered and classroom-centered perspectives.

The primary objective of this research is to elucidate the strategies through which *pesantren* cultivate independence among early-age *santri* and to contribute a contextually grounded perspective to global debates on early childhood independence and residential education. By examining *pesantren* as a distinctive educational model, this study seeks to inform scholarly discourse and educational practice, offering insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers concerned with character formation and independence in early childhood education.

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how independence is developed among young Santri at *Pesantren Mamhis* in Kediri, East Java, Indonesia (Creswell, 2015; Yin, 2018). The single-case design was selected for its relevance to unique institutional practices, especially given the *pesantren's* acceptance of children as young as five years old. The research aimed to generate deep insights into daily routines and institutional strategies that promote self-reliance in early childhood religious education. *Pesantren Mamhis* was chosen due to its longstanding tradition of integrating character development with structured daily responsibilities.

Data collection was conducted over a 12-month period (March 2022–March 2023) using participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observations focused on routine activities such as preparing meals, managing personal belongings, and maintaining dormitory hygiene. Semi-structured interviews lasting 45–60 minutes were conducted with 24 Santri, 6 experienced caretakers, and 2 *pesantren* leaders, selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in fostering independence. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Written parental/guardian consent was obtained prior to the participation of children, and oral assent was confirmed with the *Santri* themselves.

The sampling strategy ensured that participants had substantial experience with independence-building programs, and sampling continued until data saturation was reached. Supporting documents, including daily schedules and curricular materials, were

reviewed to cross-check consistency with observations and interview responses. Data were analyzed using the interactive model, which involves data condensation, display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2019). NVivo 11 software was used to support systematic coding across three stages: open coding for identifying concepts, axial coding to build connections, and selective coding to refine core themes such as structured routine, adult guidance, and peer support.

To enhance validity and reliability, triangulation was conducted across data sources – interviews, observations, and documents – providing complementary perspectives on the phenomenon studied. Member checking was also applied, wherein selected participants reviewed preliminary findings to confirm their accuracy and suggest necessary adjustments. This feedback loop helped ensure that interpretations were aligned with participants' lived experiences. Overall, the methodological approach emphasized rigor, transparency, and contextual sensitivity in capturing how independence is cultivated within the *pesantren* environment.

This study was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, approval number T/38/UN34.9/KP.06.07/2023, issued on October 19, 2023, and valid from October 20, 2023 to April 30, 2024. All procedures complied with the WHO (2011) and CIOMS (2016) ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from parents/ guardians, and pseudonyms were used to preserve the confidentiality of child participants. The research design included safeguards to minimize child-specific risks: interviews were conducted in familiar environments, with the presence of caretakers when appropriate, and all questions were framed to avoid psychological discomfort or undue pressure.

C. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study regarding the development of early-age *Santri*'s independence at *Pesantren* Mamhis. The findings are categorized and analyzed based on the data collection techniques utilized, including interviews, observations, and document reviews. These findings aim to provide insights into the strategies and practices employed by caretakers to cultivate independence among young students, which is crucial for their personal development and adaptation within the *pesantren* environment.

1. Results

a. Adaptation and early challenges in developing independence

The development of independence among early-age *Santri* at *Pesantren Mamhis* begins with the expectation that children are able to manage their personal responsibilities within the boarding school environment. Besides participating in formal learning activities, they are expected to maintain personal hygiene, organize their belongings, and take responsibility for the cleanliness and orderliness of their rooms. Observations revealed that independence training is integrated into daily routines and constitutes an essential component of the *pesantren's* educational approach. According to one of the *pesantren* leaders: "*The independence of early childhood (kindergarten students) is related to (arranging) clothes, personal hygiene, and rooms, and maintaining complete school equipment*" (Interview with *Pesantren Leader 1*, 2023).

Some early-age *Santri* who have just entered *Pesantren Mamhis* often lack basic independence, particularly in tasks such as bathing and dressing. Observations during their first month revealed that many of them required close supervision from caretakers to perform daily hygiene routines, as they were previously accustomed to parental assistance at home. One caretaker explained that new students generally need to be accompanied and guided during initial activities due to unfamiliarity with self-care habits. During this adaptation phase, caretakers play an essential role in supporting students through tasks like bathing, dressing, and toilet training. They also train *Santri* to be responsible for maintaining their belongings and organizing their rooms. Another caretaker noted that children can learn to be independent through consistent supervision and direction, especially in tasks like room cleaning, which otherwise tend to be neglected.

The *pesantren* applies a minimum age requirement of five years for admission as an early-age *Santri*, with younger children not being accepted. This policy reflects institutional considerations of developmental readiness, recognizing five years of age as a critical period for the emergence of autonomy, self-help skills, and preparedness for structured educational environments. At this stage, children experience significant growth in executive functions, including working memory and self-regulation, which are essential for managing daily routines independently. According to one of the *pesantren* leaders, "*Sing lima tahun itukan hanya napa belajari awal carane, momong tenanan lha lagek tiga tahun taseh nyawii*" (*Those five years is just the beginning of learning how to do it*) (Interview with *Pesantren Leader 2*, 2023). This statement reflects the *pesantren's* understanding of child development, highlighting that meaningful independence training can only begin once children reach this developmental threshold. The policy also reflects Vygotsky's concept

of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), wherein scaffolding from more capable adults—such as caregivers or teachers—is necessary for transitioning from assisted to autonomous behavior. By applying structured routines and gradually withdrawing adult support, the *pesantren's* approach effectively operationalizes ZPD in a real-world educational setting. Moreover, this age-based entry requirement prevents premature institutionalization that might otherwise overwhelm children who are developmentally unprepared, thereby enhancing both psychological well-being and learning outcomes.

b. Caretakers' role in guiding and supporting independence

Caretakers at the *pesantren* guide early-age *Santri* toward self-care by modeling daily routines such as bathing, dressing, and wearing traditional clothing (Field Observation 1, 2023). In the structured environment of a *pesantren*, such modeling facilitates the acquisition of independent behaviors. During the first month of dormitory life, most students begin their independence training under close supervision, which is gradually reduced as they become more capable. According to caretakers, this gradual reduction of assistance enables students to perform daily tasks independently within one to two months of adaptation.

Example giving is also applied to teach early-age *Santri* how to organize their clothing. Each child is allowed to bring five sets of clothes and is provided with a personal storage box or clothing rack. Every afternoon after the *Asr* prayer, children are guided in arranging their clothes according to their abilities. One caretaker explained, "*biasane nata baju niku sonten, nggih (ditata sendiri)*" (I usually arrange my clothes in the evening, well I arrange them by myself) (Interview with Caretaker 4, 2023). Other activities requiring guidance include putting on and taking off clothes, buttoning shirts, and wearing sarongs. Observations showed that teachers who supervise Qur'anic learning sessions often checked students' appearance before class and occasionally assisted them in tidying their clothing and properly wearing their sarongs (Field Observation 2, 2023).

Field observations further revealed that caretakers provided continuous guidance during daily self-care activities, particularly bathing, dressing, and maintaining personal hygiene. Assistance was generally more intensive during the initial adaptation period and gradually reduced as students became more familiar with the routines. During observation sessions, caretakers were seen accompanying children to the bathing area, reminding them to apply soap properly, brush their teeth, use shampoo, and rinse thoroughly. One caretaker explained, "*kita bangunkan, terus kita dampingi mandi di sebelah kamar mandi. Kita arahkan ayo dikosoki, ayo sabunan, lha iki belum sikatan iki, biasanya ngoten*" (We wake them up, accompany

them to the bathroom, and guide them to wash properly, even reminding them if they miss a step) (Interview with Caretaker 4, 2023). Similar observations indicated that caretakers initially provided intensive assistance during these routines but gradually reduced their involvement as children became more capable of performing the activities independently (Field Observation 1, 2023).

Accompaniment and direction were also provided during breakfast, lunch, and evening meals. Caretakers were responsible for distributing rice and side dishes, while students ate together with their peers. Observations noted that caretakers consistently reminded students to finish their meals and assisted younger children who experienced difficulties using eating utensils. Some students also required guidance in washing and storing their cutlery after meals. After eating, the early-age *Santri* washed their own utensils and stored them in their respective rooms. Most of the utensils were made of plastic, making them easier for children to manage and less likely to be damaged during daily use (Field Observation 1, 2023; Field Observation 2, 2023).

Following the adaptation period, most early-age *Santri* appeared comfortable and well-adjusted to life in the *pesantren*. They no longer displayed signs of homesickness and were generally able to perform daily routines independently. Nevertheless, caretakers continued to provide reminders regarding room cleanliness, clothing organization, bed-making, and the arrangement of personal belongings. As one caretaker noted, "*Kalo membersihkan kan sampai sekarang tetap diingatkan terus. Nggih mungkin efek kegiatan padat, dados capek, hehe*" (We still need to remind them about cleaning. Perhaps because their daily activities are quite busy and tiring) (Interview with Caretaker 2, 2023).

c. Strategies and responsibilities in maintaining discipline and cleanliness

Maintaining the cleanliness and orderliness of rooms is a shared responsibility among early-age *Santri*, with each room accommodating approximately ten male students or four female students. Daily activities such as arranging clothes, organizing personal belongings, and disposing of trash formed part of the students' routine responsibilities. Observations indicated that caretakers actively supervised cleaning activities and regularly reminded students to participate in tasks such as tidying bedding, organizing personal equipment, and maintaining room cleanliness. In addition to supervising these activities, caretakers and appointed room attendants were responsible for monitoring the students' general well-being, including personal hygiene and health. Several caretakers described

their role as extending beyond supervision, emphasizing their responsibility to accompany and support students throughout their daily activities within the *pesantren* environment.

To encourage responsibility for cleanliness and order, caretakers implemented various forms of reinforcement. One approach involved providing small rewards to students who consistently maintained their rooms and personal belongings. According to one caretaker, candy was occasionally given to students who demonstrated diligence in organizing their rooms and completing assigned responsibilities (Interview with Caretaker 2, 2023). As explained by the caretaker, "*Kadang nggih dikasih permen, heheh. Karena permen itu terfavorit bagi anak TK, hehe*" (Sometimes I give candy, heheh. Because candy is the favorite for kindergarten children, hehe) (Interview with Caretaker 2, 2023).

In addition to rewards, caretakers also applied disciplinary measures to encourage compliance with daily responsibilities. One commonly used strategy involved restricting access to television viewing for students who neglected room-cleaning duties. A caretaker explained, "*Menonton televisi bu, heheh. Kadang sedikit diancam kalo kamar e ndak bersih ndak liat televisi*" (Watching television, ma'am, heheh. Sometimes they are slightly threatened that if their room is not clean, they cannot watch television) (Interview with Caretaker 2, 2023).

Observations further indicated that students who had successfully adapted to *pesantren* life were generally able to carry out daily routines with minimal assistance. They demonstrated greater responsibility in managing personal belongings, preparing for learning activities, and responding to scheduled routines. When class sessions were about to begin and the bell rang, many students immediately prepared themselves, gathered necessary learning materials, and proceeded to the classroom without direct instruction from caretakers. Similar patterns were reported by caretakers, who observed that students increasingly understood their daily responsibilities and routines after completing the adaptation process. One caretaker stated:

"When they are independent, they will know and be aware and put things in their place. For example, when they are playing then the bell rings, they will immediately gather, drink, relieve themselves (if they want), take ablution water, then go straight to class, and the independence of children is undoubtedly highly expected by their parents" (Interview with Caretaker 5, 2023).

The statement above reflects the observable changes in students' daily behavior following the adaptation process. Field observations indicated that many early-age *Santri* were able to manage routine activities independently, including preparing themselves for class, organizing personal belongings, and responding appropriately to scheduled activities without continuous reminders from caretakers. Although occasional supervision was still

required, particularly regarding room cleanliness and personal organization, most students demonstrated greater responsibility and awareness of their daily obligations within the *pesantren* environment.

2. Discussion

This study demonstrates that independence among early-age *santri* is not merely an individual developmental outcome arising from biological maturation. Rather, it is a socially organized capacity cultivated through the interaction of institutional structures, caregiver mediation, communal responsibilities, and the internalization of religious and cultural values. The findings suggest that autonomy is inseparable from the educational environment in which children are embedded and should therefore be understood not simply as a psychological attribute but as a developmental achievement shaped through participation in a structured social world. This interpretation reinforces contemporary perspectives that emphasize the interdependence of human development and broader social-cultural contexts (Lester & O'Reilly, 2021; Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2019).

The significance of this finding lies in its challenge to dominant assumptions within early childhood education, where independence is often viewed primarily as a product of family socialization, parenting practices, or classroom learning. While these factors remain important, the findings indicate that institutional environments can also play a decisive role when responsibility is intentionally embedded within everyday life. The *pesantren* demonstrates that autonomy does not necessarily emerge through increasing freedom from structure (Mutammam et al., 2025; Sukman et al., 2025). Instead, it develops through meaningful engagement with structured routines, communal obligations, and moral expectations that repeatedly encourage *self-regulation* and responsibility. As a result, independence becomes a lived experience rather than an abstract educational goal. This positions the *pesantren* as an alternative developmental pathway that balances close guidance with progressively increasing responsibility (Mutammam et al., 2025; Apriyana et al., 2025), a model that remains relatively underrepresented in international scholarship despite its pedagogical coherence.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support an integrative understanding of independence formation in which social learning, environmental structure, behavioral reinforcement, and psychological development operate simultaneously. Consistent with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, young *santri* acquire independent behaviors through observation of caregivers, peers, and institutional role models (Bandura, 1977). However,

observation alone is insufficient; its effectiveness depends on a structured environment that requires children to enact what they learn. This process becomes clearer through Vygotsky's concept of *scaffolding*, where caregivers gradually reduce support as competence increases, allowing autonomy to emerge through managed transitions from assisted to independent action. Within the *pesantren*, such transitions are embedded in daily routines that provide responsibility while maintaining access to guidance. This pattern supports broader perspectives suggesting that children's autonomy develops most effectively when responsibility is accompanied by appropriate social support and opportunities for competence building (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Crocetti et al., 2023).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory further strengthens the interpretation of these findings by illustrating how development occurs within interconnected social environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The findings suggest that the *pesantren* functions as a highly integrated developmental ecology in which caregiver interactions, peer relationships, institutional regulations, communal expectations, and religious practices operate simultaneously. This reflects the broader educational role of *pesantren* as institutions that integrate moral formation, character development, and everyday socialization within a unified educational setting (Anam et al., 2019; Bashori, 1995; Ramdhan et al., 2020). Unlike conventional educational settings where developmental influences are distributed across home and school contexts, the *pesantren* concentrates these influences within a residential environment, creating a consistent system of expectations that facilitates the internalization of responsibility, discipline, and autonomous behavior (Mutammam et al., 2025; Apriyana et al., 2025). Consequently, independence emerges not merely through instruction but through continuous participation in communal life.

The findings also highlight the relevance of reinforcement-based explanations of behavior. Consistent with operant conditioning theory, repeated routines, behavioral expectations, rewards, and corrective measures contribute to the consolidation of independent conduct (Sabri & Asitasari, 2025; Skinner, 1953). However, the study suggests that reinforcement alone cannot explain sustained autonomy. While external regulation may initiate behavioral adjustment, long-term independence develops when responsibilities become internally valued commitments. This interpretation aligns with Self-Determination Theory, which emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness as foundations of self-directed behavior (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The gradual transition from caregiver-directed actions to self-initiated responsibility observed among the *santri* reflects this developmental process.

Taken together, these findings indicate that independence formation is best understood through an integrative perspective rather than a single theoretical lens. *Scaffolding* explains how competence is developed, ecological theory highlights the importance of environmental consistency, social learning theory explains behavioral transmission, operant conditioning accounts for behavioral stabilization, and Self-Determination Theory clarifies how externally guided actions become internally regulated behaviors. This interpretation supports growing scholarship emphasizing the limitations of singular theoretical explanations for complex developmental processes (Crocetti et al., 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Skinner, 1953; Napolitano et al., 2021). More importantly, the *pesantren* context demonstrates how these mechanisms converge within a real educational environment to cultivate autonomy among young children.

The novelty of this study does not simply lie in examining independence within a *pesantren* setting. Its primary contribution lies in demonstrating how independence is systematically produced through the interaction of institutional design, caregiver mediation, and religious-cultural value internalization. Previous studies have predominantly examined autonomy within family environments or formal educational settings, where independence is often conceptualized as a product of parenting styles, instructional methods, or individual developmental characteristics. While these perspectives have enriched understanding of child development, they offer only partial explanations for autonomy formation within residential educational environments. The present findings suggest that independence should also be understood as a socially, culturally, and spiritually mediated process embedded within the organizational logic of educational institutions themselves.

This contribution is particularly important because it extends existing discussions regarding child development beyond dominant family-centered and classroom-centered frameworks. Earlier studies have consistently identified independence as an important foundation for resilience, creativity, adaptability, and self-confidence (Touhill, 2013). Likewise, scholarship on *pesantren* has highlighted their role in moral education, character formation, and holistic development (Anam et al., 2019). However, the mechanisms through which these institutional characteristics are translated into observable forms of autonomous behavior among very young children have remained insufficiently theorized. The present findings suggest that independence is not cultivated primarily through moral instruction or disciplinary

discourse. Rather, it emerges through the continuous integration of routine responsibilities, guided participation, and value-based socialization. This distinction shifts analytical attention from what institutions teach to how institutions organize everyday experiences that shape developmental capacities.

The findings also offer a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between dependence and autonomy. Previous studies frequently identify parental overprotection and excessive adult intervention as significant barriers to independence development (Fadlillah et al., 2020; Insani et al., 2021; Wuryandani et al., 2016). The experiences of newly enrolled *santri* initially support this observation, as many children entered the *pesantren* with limited self-care skills and substantial reliance upon adult assistance. However, the findings further demonstrate that dependence is not a fixed condition. Through structured routines, communal obligations, and sustained guidance, children gradually acquire the competence and confidence necessary to manage responsibilities independently. This suggests that educational environments can function as transformative spaces capable of reshaping behavioral patterns established prior to institutional entry. Consequently, the study extends previous scholarship by demonstrating that independence is not solely determined by earlier family experiences but can be actively reconstructed through educational intervention.

This interpretation helps explain why the *pesantren* environment appears particularly effective in fostering autonomy. The structured nature of *pesantren* life creates repeated opportunities for children to engage in responsibility-taking, decision-making, and self-management. Unlike many educational settings where independence training is confined to specific pedagogical activities, the *pesantren* integrates independence into the entirety of daily experience. Responsibilities associated with personal hygiene, room maintenance, time management, religious practice, and communal participation become ordinary aspects of life rather than isolated educational exercises. This observation reinforces previous findings regarding the effectiveness of structured educational environments in supporting autonomy development (Koivula et al., 2017; Taylor, 2010), while simultaneously offering a culturally grounded explanation rooted in Islamic educational traditions (Bashori, 1995; Ramdhan et al., 2020).

The implications of these findings extend beyond the immediate context of *Pesantren* Mambaul Hisan. From a policy perspective, the study demonstrates that independence should not be treated as an incidental by-product of education. Rather, it should be understood as a developmental outcome requiring intentional institutional design. Structured routines, age-appropriate responsibilities, and

sustained caregiver support emerge as essential components of effective independence formation. The minimum admission age policy reflects an awareness of developmental readiness that may inform admission practices within other residential educational contexts. Similarly, the central role of caregivers highlights the importance of professional preparation in *scaffolding*, emotional support, behavioral modeling, and gradual responsibility transfer. These findings reinforce calls for strengthened caregiver training within residential educational environments (Fathorrahman et al., 2024; Fathiyatussa'adah et al., 2022).

At a broader level, the findings contribute to contemporary debates concerning character education in increasingly complex societies. Educational systems worldwide continue to face challenges associated with growing individualism, digital dependency, declining social cohesion, and concerns regarding children's social-emotional development. The findings suggest that values become influential not when they are merely taught, but when they are embedded within social practices. Within the *pesantren* context, responsibility, discipline, and autonomy are repeatedly enacted through everyday routines, enabling values to become lived experiences rather than abstract concepts. This insight contributes to wider discussions concerning moral education and socialization by demonstrating how educational environments can translate normative ideals into observable developmental outcomes.

The broader international relevance of the findings becomes particularly evident when the *pesantren* is situated alongside other residential educational traditions. Islamic boarding schools in Malaysia emphasize discipline and self-sufficiency through structured religious learning (Abdullah & Abdullah, 2018; Putra et al., 2026), while British boarding schools cultivate responsibility and resilience through highly organized daily schedules (Lathifah et al., 2025; Hefner, 2016; Foliano et al., 2019). In Pakistan, madrasah institutions combine moral education with varying forms of institutional structure (Shehryar et al., 2021; Supriani et al., 2023), and educational traditions in East Asia continue to emphasize collective responsibility, discipline, and adaptability as responses to social transformation (Saidi et al., 2025; Junaedi et al., 2025). Beyond explicitly religious settings, residential schools in the United States and the United Kingdom similarly integrate character formation with academic achievement (Irfana et al., 2023; Sukman et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, the contribution of the *pesantren* extends beyond demonstrating similarities with these institutions. The findings suggest that the *pesantren* offers a

distinctive model in which independence emerges through the integration of educational structure, communal participation, and value internalization. While many educational systems emphasize either individual achievement or moral instruction, the *pesantren* demonstrates how these dimensions can be connected through everyday institutional practices. This observation contributes to international discussions seeking alternatives to the increasingly polarized distinction between individual autonomy and collective responsibility. The findings suggest that independence is not produced solely through freedom of choice, nor exclusively through discipline and regulation. Instead, it emerges through the interaction between responsibility, social belonging, and meaningful participation in community life.

Furthermore, the study contributes to growing international scholarship emphasizing the importance of culturally embedded approaches to child development. Contemporary developmental research increasingly recognizes that educational practices cannot be fully understood when detached from their cultural, religious, and social contexts (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2019). The findings support this perspective by demonstrating that the effectiveness of independence formation within the *pesantren* is inseparable from the institutional culture that surrounds it. Religious values, communal obligations, and shared expectations do not function as peripheral influences but as integral components of the developmental process itself. Consequently, the study challenges universalistic assumptions that autonomy must follow identical pathways across contexts and instead suggests that diverse cultural traditions may generate distinct yet equally effective routes toward independence and *self-regulation*.

Viewed from this broader perspective, the *pesantren* can be understood as a form of *community-based character education* whose significance transcends its immediate religious setting. Its emphasis on structured independence, communal accountability, and moral grounding offers a framework adaptable across educational contexts while remaining sensitive to local cultural values. By integrating predictability, caregiver *scaffolding*, and value internalization into everyday practice, the *pesantren* model aligns with universal developmental principles while maintaining its distinctive cultural character (Simsek, 2012; Sumarna et al., 2024). This combination of contextual specificity and broader applicability strengthens the international relevance of the study and demonstrates how locally grounded educational practices can contribute meaningfully to global scholarly conversations.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study focuses on a single *pesantren*, and therefore the findings reflect the specific institutional culture, educational philosophy, and caregiving practices of *Pesantren Mambaul Hisan*. Given the diversity of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, variations in curriculum design, governance structures, and educational priorities may influence independence development in different ways. Second, although the qualitative case study approach provides rich contextual insights into everyday educational processes, it does not permit quantitative assessment of developmental outcomes or systematic comparison across institutional settings. Finally, the study concentrates primarily on processes occurring within the *pesantren* environment and therefore does not comprehensively examine how family background, socio-economic conditions, or wider community influences may shape children's experiences of independence. These limitations do not diminish the significance of the findings. Rather, they clarify the contextual boundaries within which the conclusions should be interpreted and highlight the complexity of independence as a developmental phenomenon shaped by multiple interacting influences.

D. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that independence among early-age *santri* is not merely a developmental outcome that emerges naturally with age, but a socially organized capacity cultivated through the interaction of institutional structures, caregiver mediation, communal responsibilities, and religious value internalization. The findings show that the *pesantren* environment systematically fosters autonomy by embedding responsibility, discipline, and *self-regulation* within everyday educational experiences. Consequently, independence should be understood not only as an individual characteristic but also as a developmental achievement produced through sustained participation in a structured socio-educational environment.

The primary contribution of this study lies in advancing a conceptual understanding of early-age independence as a socially, culturally, and spiritually mediated process. By positioning the *pesantren* as a *socio-cultural ecology of independence formation*, this research extends prevailing theories of child autonomy beyond family-centered and classroom-centered perspectives. The study demonstrates that independence can be intentionally cultivated through institutional design, where

structured routines, caregiver *scaffolding*, and value-based socialization operate together to support children's developmental growth. Beyond its immediate context, the study also highlights the broader relevance of locally grounded educational traditions for international discussions on character education, residential schooling, and holistic child development. The findings suggest that educational environments capable of integrating responsibility, social belonging, and moral guidance into everyday practice can provide meaningful alternatives to approaches that treat autonomy solely as an individual psychological outcome.

Building upon the limitations of this study, future research should examine multiple *pesantren* with diverse educational philosophies, governance structures, and caregiving practices to better understand contextual variations in independence formation. Comparative studies involving religious and secular residential educational institutions may further illuminate how different institutional environments shape children's autonomy. In addition, mixed-method approaches could complement qualitative insights by assessing developmental outcomes and enabling systematic comparisons across educational settings.

Ultimately, this study affirms that independence is most effectively cultivated when responsibility, guidance, and value formation are integrated within everyday educational life. The experience of the *pesantren* demonstrates that young children can develop autonomy and responsibility not despite structure, but through meaningful engagement with structured educational environments that support both personal growth and social development.

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Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article. The research was conducted independently, and the authors have no financial, institutional, or personal relationships that could have influenced the design, implementation, analysis, interpretation, or reporting of the study.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Grammarly and QuillBot to assist with language editing, grammar correction, sentence refinement, and readability improvement. These tools were employed solely to enhance the clarity and presentation of the manuscript. All aspects of the research, including conceptualization, study design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and conclusions, were conducted exclusively by the authors. The authors carefully reviewed and edited the outputs generated by these tools and assumed full responsibility for the content, accuracy, and integrity of this publication.

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