



STRENGTHENING LITERACY CULTURE AMONG SANTRI TO ENHANCE SCHOLARLY KNOWLEDGE AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IN PESANTREN

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the role of literacy culture in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) as a transformative force for both knowledge development and character formation. Employing a qualitative multi-site design at Pesantren Persis 99 Rancabango Garut and Daarul Rahman Islamic Boarding School Jakarta, data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, and analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding. The findings demonstrate that pesantren literacy culture operates as an integrative system that bridges religious and digital literacy practices. Rather than functioning as a purely cognitive skill, literacy is embedded in a broader pedagogical process that shapes students' religious dispositions, intellectual discipline, social responsibility, and moral integrity. This integrative process is grounded in a scientific-based religious learning paradigm that synthesizes qauliyah (revealed knowledge) and kauniyah (empirical reality), thereby positioning literacy as both epistemic and ethical practice. This study advances the concept of Progressive Literacy, defined as a dynamic trajectory from knowledge acquisition to the internalization of values and the development of social consciousness. Theoretically, this concept extends existing literacy frameworks by incorporating spiritual and character dimensions within an Islamic educational context. Practically, it offers a replicable model for strengthening literacy-based educational management in pesantren and other Islamic learning institutions.

Keywords: literacy culture, pesantren, progressive literacy, character formation, Islamic education

INTRODUCTION

Literacy is a fundamental foundation for developing human resources and advancing a nation's civilization. The progress of society is closely associated with the literacy levels of its citizens, including their abilities to read, write, think critically, and produce knowledge. In the context of modern education, literacy is no longer understood merely as a technical skill but as a multidimensional set of competencies encompassing information, media, digital, scientific, and moral literacy. In Indonesia, literacy remains a strategic national challenge (Taufikin et al., 2025). Various international assessments indicate that Indonesian students' literacy performance remains below the average of OECD countries, particularly in reading comprehension and critical thinking. This situation has encouraged the government to introduce various initiatives, including the National Literacy Movement and the strengthening of school literacy programs, as systematic efforts to improve learning quality and national competitiveness (Ali & Halim, 2023).

However, efforts to strengthen literacy cannot be separated from the social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which education takes place. Literacy is not merely an individual skill but also a social practice shaped by values, traditions, and institutional structures. Therefore, literacy development must consider the characteristics of



educational institutions, including Islamic educational institutions such as pesantren, which possess distinctive scholarly traditions and spiritual values. As one of Indonesia's oldest Islamic educational institutions, pesantren have long served as centers for transmitting Islamic knowledge and cultivating the moral character of Muslim communities (Haris et al., 2022). Traditions such as the study of classical Islamic texts (kitab kuning), halaqah (religious study circles), musyawarah (deliberative discussions), and rihlah ilmiah (scholarly journeys) demonstrate that pesantren have maintained a strong literacy culture since their early development. Literacy in pesantren is not limited to textual mastery but also emphasizes the internalization of values, proper conduct (adab), and moral character (akhlak) as central components of Islamic education (Wadud & Chairiyah, 2024).

Nevertheless, social dynamics and advances in information technology require pesantren to adapt to emerging forms of literacy, including digital, media, and modern academic literacy. The challenges of globalization, pluralism, and technological disruption require students (santri) not only to understand classical religious texts but also to communicate effectively, think critically, and contribute meaningfully to public discourse. Various studies indicate that some pesantren have begun to develop modern literacy programs, such as pesantren magazines, academic writing workshops, student research initiatives, and the integration of digital technology into learning activities. However, these literacy initiatives often remain fragmented, sporadic, and insufficiently integrated into the curriculum and institutional culture of pesantren (Sholihah et al., 2026).

Furthermore, existing studies on literacy in pesantren have tended to emphasize academic or managerial aspects, while the dimensions of character development and the moral formation of santri have received comparatively limited in-depth and comprehensive attention. Yet, the primary objective of pesantren education is not merely to produce intellectually capable students but also to cultivate individuals with noble character, moral integrity, and the capacity to become agents of social change. From the perspective of Islamic education, knowledge and moral character are inseparable. Knowledge without proper conduct may lead to intellectual arrogance, whereas moral conduct without sufficient knowledge may encourage fanaticism and intellectual stagnation. Therefore, literacy in pesantren should be designed as an integrative instrument that harmoniously connects cognitive, affective, and moral dimensions (Masuwd et al., 2026).

At the individual level, a literacy culture promotes critical thinking by encouraging santri not merely to accept information but also to question, evaluate, and compare it from multiple perspectives. In the face of rapidly expanding global information and the digital era, media and digital literacy are essential for enabling santri to engage in communication, learning, and Islamic preaching (dakwah) intelligently and ethically. At the institutional level, the importance of literacy lies in improving the quality and relevance of pesantren education (Ahmadi, 2023). Pesantren that prioritize literacy can enhance educational quality by enriching their curricula and implementing more interactive learning methods, including essay writing, basic research, scientific writing, and in-depth discussions. Strengthening literacy can also serve as a catalyst for transforming pesantren into centers of excellence in religious research and Islamic scholarship. In the contemporary knowledge-based era, educational institutions are expected not only to transmit knowledge but also to generate new knowledge (Zahid, 2022).



Several contemporary educational theories, including progressive education, the capabilities approach, and critical literacy theory, emphasize that literacy should extend beyond knowledge acquisition to encompass personality development, social awareness, and moral responsibility. These perspectives align with the educational objectives of pesantren, which emphasize a balance between knowledge, faith, and righteous action. Against this background, further investigation is needed to understand how literacy culture can be systematically developed within pesantren and how it contributes to the advancement of scholarly knowledge and the character formation of santri. This study seeks not only to examine existing literacy practices but also to formulate a conceptual model explaining the relationship between literacy, knowledge development, and character formation within the pesantren context.

This study focuses on two pesantren with distinct characteristics that are both actively engaged in developing a literacy culture: Pesantren Persis 99 Rancabango Garut and Pesantren Daarul Rahman Jakarta. These institutions were selected because of their educational innovations, institutional literacy systems, and strong scholarly orientations, making them relevant sites for a multisite study. This research is expected to contribute theoretically to the development of a pesantren-based literacy framework while offering practical insights for pesantren administrators, educators, and policymakers in designing literacy programs that are more comprehensive, sustainable, and oriented toward the character development of santri.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a multisite case study design, enabling an in-depth understanding of phenomena within different real-world contexts that share similar characteristics (Ahmed, 2024). This approach was selected because the study aimed to explore the meanings, processes, and dynamics of literacy culture in pesantren holistically. The research was conducted at two Islamic boarding schools: Pesantren Persis 99 Rancabango Garut and Pesantren Daarul Rahman Jakarta. The research participants included pesantren leaders, Islamic teachers (ustaz), literacy program coordinators, students (santri), and alumni involved in the development and implementation of literacy culture. Informants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling, considering their direct involvement and in-depth knowledge of the phenomena under investigation (Christou, 2023).

Data were collected through participatory observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and documentary analysis of curricula, pesantren programs, internal publications, and archives of literacy activities (Rustamana et al., 2024). Observations were conducted to capture literacy practices in classroom learning, extracurricular activities, and the daily lives of santri. Interviews were used to explore informants' perceptions, experiences, and perspectives regarding the meaning of literacy and its impact on students' knowledge development and character formation. Data analysis was conducted systematically through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. During open coding, data were coded to identify initial concepts (Lim, 2025). Axial coding was then used to establish relationships between categories and subcategories based on causal, contextual, and consequential relationships. Finally, selective coding was employed to identify core categories and develop a substantive theory grounded in the field data. Data



trustworthiness was ensured through source, method, and time triangulation, as well as member checking with key informants to verify the consistency between the researcher's interpretations and participants' experiences. In addition, peer debriefing and an audit trail were employed to enhance the credibility and dependability of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Literacy culture in pesantren cannot be separated from the Islamic scholarly tradition, which places knowledge at the center of religious and social life. Since the early development of Islam, reading, writing, memorization, and scholarly discussion have been integral components of the educational process. In the pesantren context, these traditions are manifested through the study of classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*), *halaqah* (study circles), scholarly deliberations (*musyawarah ilmiah*), and the production of religious writings, which have historically shaped a distinctive literacy ecosystem. However, as social conditions change and technology advances, the meaning of literacy has expanded significantly. Literacy is no longer limited to mastering classical texts but also encompasses the ability to access, understand, evaluate, and produce information in various forms and media. In this context, pesantren are required to reinterpret their literacy traditions to remain relevant to contemporary challenges without compromising their Islamic identity (Baharun & Rizqiyah, 2020).

The findings indicate that both pesantren have developed an integrative literacy culture by combining classical traditions with modern innovations. At Pesantren Persis 99 Rancabango, literacy is cultivated through strengthening foundational linguistic disciplines, including *nahwu* (Arabic syntax), *sharaf* (Arabic morphology), *balaghah* (Arabic rhetoric), and *qira'atul kutub* (the ability to read and interpret classical Islamic texts) (Junaidi & Hidayat, 2022). These disciplines constitute the foundation for mastering religious texts. A competency-based leveling system is implemented to ensure that each santri learns according to their abilities and intellectual development rather than age or seniority alone. This approach reflects the principle of differentiated instruction, which emphasizes adapting teaching strategies to learners' needs and characteristics. By eliminating rigid seniority-based distinctions and making competency the basis for student grouping, the pesantren creates a more egalitarian academic environment that encourages healthy competition and continuous intellectual development (Fahrurrosi & Husni, 2026).

Meanwhile, Pesantren Daarul Rahman cultivates literacy through the integration of formal learning and extracurricular literacy activities, including article writing, pesantren magazine publishing, journalism training, and the use of digital media. These programs not only improve santri's writing and critical thinking skills but also train them to communicate effectively and responsibly in the public sphere (Sahri et al., 2025). The use of digital technology in learning and literacy activities reflects a shift from print-based literacy toward multimodal literacy, which incorporates text, images, audio, and video. Santri are no longer merely consumers of information but also producers of content with educational and Islamic outreach value. This development aligns with twenty-first-century educational demands, which emphasize creativity, communication, collaboration, and critical thinking (Kurniawan et al., 2022).

Beyond academic literacy, this study identifies social literacy as another essential dimension of literacy culture in pesantren. Through community service, public discussions,



and collaboration with various stakeholders, santri are encouraged to apply their knowledge in real-world social contexts. These activities not only strengthen their communication and leadership skills but also foster empathy, social awareness, and moral responsibility. Social literacy in pesantren also serves as a means of internalizing transformative Islamic values, including justice, honesty, tolerance, and solidarity. These values are not merely taught as abstract principles but are practiced through everyday social interactions, thereby contributing to the continuous formation of santri's character. Consequently, literacy extends beyond the cognitive domain and becomes embedded in the affective and moral dimensions of education (Lamri et al., 2026).

Another significant finding is the emergence of the concept of Progressive Literacy, defined as a form of literacy that develops gradually from the mastery of knowledge toward character formation and social awareness. Progressive Literacy views literacy as an ongoing process of self-transformation rather than merely the attainment of technical competencies. This concept is consistent with the principles of progressive education, which emphasize experience, reflection, and learners' active engagement in the educational process. It also aligns with the capabilities approach, which regards education as a means of developing human capabilities comprehensively, including the ability to think critically, demonstrate empathy, participate in social life, and live with dignity. Within the pesantren context, Progressive Literacy serves as a bridge between the mastery of religious knowledge and the development of santri into ethical and responsible citizens.

This study further indicates that santri who actively participate in literacy activities tend to demonstrate greater self-confidence, stronger critical thinking skills, and more mature religious attitudes. They are not only able to understand religious texts in depth but also to contextualize their meanings within complex social realities. These findings suggest that literacy contributes significantly to the intellectual and moral development of santri. Furthermore, a strong literacy culture contributes to the establishment of a conducive academic environment within pesantren. Interactions between santri and ustaz extend beyond the transmission of knowledge to include dialogue and reflection. Teaching and learning become spaces for exchanging ideas, constructing arguments, and developing shared understandings, thereby fostering a dynamic learning community.

The Scientific Integration of Islamic Religious Studies

The scientification of *ulum al-din* (Islamic religious sciences) within pesantren represents a strategic step toward implementing Progressive Literacy. Through this approach, religious sciences are no longer viewed as static fields of learning but as dynamic bodies of knowledge that can engage with developments in modern science. This process requires establishing connections between *ayat qauliyah*, the signs of divine revelation, and *ayat kauniyah*, the signs of God manifested in natural phenomena and scientific discoveries. Such integration enables santri to develop a comprehensive, non-dichotomous understanding of reality. The scientification of religious studies is implemented through literature review assignments that require santri to explore scholarly articles and health journals to investigate the wisdom underlying religious practices. This practice of examining religious texts through scientific literature reflects the connected and integrated curriculum models, in which religious disciplines are explicitly linked to scientific disciplines to develop a comprehensive understanding (Muhsyanur et al., 2025).



In the learning process, the scientific integration of religious studies is particularly evident in the study of *thaharah* (ritual purification), especially the prescribed method of purifying a vessel contaminated by a dog's saliva. Based on literature reviews conducted by santri using various scientific journals, they identified biological and chemical explanations suggesting that soil may contain naturally occurring antimicrobial substances. Soil microorganisms, including actinomycetes, have also been investigated for their potential to inhibit the growth of pathogenic bacteria. These findings provide santri with a scientific framework for exploring the rationale behind the prophetic instruction to wash a vessel seven times, including once with soil. Conceptually, Progressive Literacy transforms the santri's understanding from mere compliance with Islamic law toward a more reasoned understanding supported by scientific inquiry. The process of connecting microbiological evidence concerning soil with the Islamic jurisprudence of *thaharah* represents an integrated curricular approach that brings together different disciplines through overlapping concepts and ideas to produce a holistic understanding (Suryantoro, 2025).

The integration of religious texts with scientific approaches and rational inquiry ultimately contributes to intellectual development and character formation. Santri reported becoming more open-minded, critical, and capable of examining problems from multiple perspectives. This intellectual maturity encourages objectivity and tolerance toward differences of opinion within society. For santri, differences in *ijtihad* (independent legal reasoning) are no longer necessarily perceived as sources of division but as consequences of differing legal interpretations supported by distinct lines of reasoning (Siregar et al., 2026). These findings reinforce the argument that integrating religion and science through literacy is essential for developing santri who possess broad intellectual horizons and strong moral integrity. The transformation of their reasoning, particularly their ability to understand differences in *ijtihad* as matters requiring scholarly examination, reflects a shift from conventional frameworks toward a more integrative and objective perspective.

Institutional Leadership and the Learning Environment

This study also reveals that the success of strengthening literacy culture in *pesantren* is significantly influenced by leadership commitment, institutional policies, and resource availability. *Pesantren* leaders with a clear and consistent vision of literacy can mobilize all institutional stakeholders to participate actively in literacy activities. Supportive institutional policies, including the integration of literacy into the curriculum and the provision of literacy facilities, are also decisive factors in successful implementation. Furthermore, the role of *ustaz* as literacy role models is essential. Teachers who regularly read, write, and engage in critical discussions provide concrete examples of the importance of literacy in both scholarly and spiritual life (Herlina et al., 2025). Such role modeling creates a learning culture that is not merely instructional but also inspirational.

This study also highlights the importance of a supportive learning environment for literacy development. Adequate library collections, access to digital learning resources, and comfortable discussion spaces are significant supporting factors. An environment rich in literacy resources encourages santri to explore knowledge independently and creatively. Nevertheless, the study identifies several challenges to strengthening literacy culture in *pesantren*, including limited resources, resistance to change, and disparities in literacy competencies among santri. Addressing these challenges requires adaptive and context-



sensitive strategies, such as literacy training for ustaz, literacy-based curriculum development, and collaboration with external stakeholders.

Critical Literacy and Social Transformation

From the perspective of critical literacy, literacy is understood not merely as a technical skill but also as a means of empowerment and social transformation. Within pesantren, critical literacy equips santri with the ability to analyze social realities reflectively, question injustice, and contribute to efforts aimed at improving society. This role aligns with the broader mission of pesantren as agents of social and moral change. The findings also demonstrate that integrating religious literacy with modern literacy does not necessarily create conflict; rather, the two can enrich one another. Mastery of foundational Arabic linguistic disciplines and classical Islamic texts provides a strong epistemological foundation, while modern literacy enables santri to engage with global discourse and develop contextually relevant perspectives. This integration produces santri who not only possess *tafaqquh fi al-din* (a deep understanding of religion) but are also capable of contributing to contemporary intellectual discussions (Umar et al., 2023).

In character development, literacy functions as a means of internalizing values and cultivating positive habits. Through reading and writing, santri learn patience, perseverance, honesty, and responsibility. Through scholarly discussions and debates, they learn to appreciate differences, remain open-minded, and develop empathy. Consequently, literacy contributes significantly to the holistic development of santri's character. The study also identifies the strategic role of literacy in strengthening the identity of santri as moderate, tolerant, and intellectually broad-minded Muslims. In pluralistic societies, santri with strong literacy competencies are more likely to develop inclusive religious perspectives and serve as bridges for dialogue among different social and religious groups. This demonstrates that literacy influences not only individuals but also social cohesion and community harmony.

A strong literacy culture also encourages pesantren to transform into centers of knowledge production rather than functioning solely as institutions for knowledge transmission. Santri and ustaz become active producers of scholarly works, articles, and publications that contribute to the development of Islamic discourse and national education. This transformation reflects the growing importance of research-oriented education and knowledge production within pesantren. Overall, strengthening literacy culture in pesantren has broad implications for intellectual development, character formation, religious identity, and social contribution. Literacy functions not merely as a learning tool but also as a medium for sustained individual and social transformation (Halid et al., 2024).

Progressive Literacy Theory

Progressive Literacy Theory is a theoretical construct that conceptualizes literacy not merely as the ability to read and write but as an epistemological and ethical instrument that simultaneously develops intellectual depth and moral maturity through integrative, reflective, and science-oriented learning, particularly in the study of *ulum al-din*. This theory is grounded in empirical findings from two research sites, Pesantren Persis 99 Rancabango Garut and Pesantren Daarul Rahman Jakarta. The findings indicate that a



strong literacy culture, developed through the study of classical Islamic texts (turats), exploration of modern scientific literature, critical discussion, and consistent academic writing, produces two principal outcomes. The first is the deepening of scholarly knowledge through advanced learning and critical reasoning. The second is the internalization of moral values, including akhlaq (moral character), adab (proper conduct), and academic integrity. Within this framework, literacy progresses from a technical competency toward a transformative process that integrates intellectual development, ethical awareness, and character formation. This relationship can be expressed as follows:

Literacy, Cognitive Processes, Knowledge Integration, Value Awareness, Intellectual Development and Character Formation

Table 1. Positioning Progressive Literacy within Existing Literacy Paradigms

Aspect	Conventional Western Literacy	Progressive Literacy
Primary focus	Cognitive skills, including reading and writing	Cognitive and affective development
Objective	Academic competence	Intellectual development and character formation
Approach	Often secular in orientation	Integrative, connecting revelation and science
Nature of knowledge	Frequently approached through separate disciplines	Holistic and interdisciplinary
Role of values	Varies across educational approaches	Central to the learning process
Expected outcome	A literate individual	A knowledgeable individual with strong moral character and proper conduct

Progressive Literacy Theory emphasizes that literacy involves more than reading words (reading the word); it also entails interpreting meaning (reading the meaning) and shaping oneself (shaping the self). Within pesantren, literacy becomes a pathway toward integrating 'ilm (knowledge) and adab (character), producing individuals who are intellectually capable and morally mature. Based on the findings concerning the scientific integration of religious studies in pesantren, systematic connections between revealed knowledge (ayat qauliyah), scientific reasoning, and empirical reality (ayat kauniyah) have contributed to the development of santri with comprehensive and multidimensional intellectual capacities. Santri are no longer positioned merely as passive recipients of knowledge but develop into active, critical, and reflective intellectual participants in understanding religious teachings. They are able to examine religious texts (nash) in depth through linguistic and Islamic legal methodologies while connecting their interpretations with scientific discoveries and contemporary social developments. This process produces understandings that are not only normative but also reasoned and contextually relevant.

The scientification process cultivates intellectual honesty, objectivity, and scientific discipline in drawing legal conclusions. These qualities help santri avoid unsupported blind



imitation (taqlid) and narrow forms of religious fanaticism. In practice, santri become more selective and critical when evaluating information, particularly in the digital era, and develop the ability to verify and validate religious discourse circulating in society. The integration of scientific approaches into religious studies in pesantren therefore produces more than santri who are 'alim, or knowledgeable in religious matters. It also nurtures religious scholars capable of bridging revelation, reason, and reality while maintaining strong moral integrity and proper conduct in applying and transforming their knowledge within society.

CONCLUSION

Literacy culture constitutes a strategic foundation for enhancing scholarly knowledge and developing the character of santri in pesantren. Literacy functions not merely as a technical skill involving reading and writing but as an ecosystem of values, habits, and practices that shapes how santri think, behave, and act in their academic, social, and spiritual lives. Strengthening literacy culture in pesantren contributes to the intellectual development of santri, particularly in understanding religious texts, thinking critically, and producing scholarly writing. Santri who actively participate in literacy activities demonstrate stronger analytical abilities, greater self-confidence, and improved preparedness for further education and meaningful contributions to society.

Beyond intellectual development, literacy also plays a significant role in character formation. Through sustained literacy activities, santri internalize moral values such as honesty, responsibility, discipline, tolerance, and empathy. Literacy provides an effective means of connecting knowledge with adab, preventing pesantren education from becoming trapped in a dichotomy between intellectual achievement and moral maturity. The principal contribution of this study is the development of the concept of Progressive Literacy, which describes literacy as a gradual process extending from knowledge acquisition toward character formation and social awareness. Progressive Literacy positions literacy as an ongoing process of self-transformation rather than merely the achievement of technical competencies.

This concept offers a theoretical contribution to the development of literacy studies within pesantren and Islamic education. Practically, this study proposes an integrative, systematic, and sustainable model for strengthening literacy culture in pesantren. The model emphasizes leadership commitment, supportive institutional policies, teacher role modeling, adequate resources, and active student participation. It can be adapted by other pesantren and Islamic educational institutions to improve educational quality and student character development. This study confirms that strengthening literacy culture in pesantren affects not only individual santri but also the broader role of pesantren as centers of scholarship, national character formation, and social transformation. Therefore, the development of literacy in pesantren deserves serious attention from educators, institutional administrators, and policymakers as an integral component of national education development.

An ideal literacy culture in pesantren should be formulated as an integrative, continuous system based on the synergy between Islamic scholarly traditions and modern scientific approaches. Literacy should no longer be understood merely as the ability to read and write but as a process of shaping thought, interpreting reality, and developing attitudes



grounded in scholarly depth and moral maturity. In this context, learning in pesantren should be designed to encourage santri to actively access, examine, and critically evaluate diverse sources of literature, including classical Islamic texts (turats) and contemporary publications. Such practices foster comprehensive analytical abilities and help prevent fragmented understandings of knowledge. This process should be reinforced through the integration of ayat qauliyah and ayat kauniyah, enabling santri to understand religion rationally, contextually, and in ways relevant to contemporary developments.

An ideal literacy culture should also incorporate methodological practices such as observation, reasoning, and scientific verification when examining religious evidence and social realities. These practices cultivate objectivity, intellectual honesty, and responsibility when formulating legal conclusions or scholarly positions. Ultimately, an ideal literacy culture in pesantren should produce individuals who excel not only in mastering knowledge but also in maintaining strong moral character. The deeper the literacy competencies, the more profound the intellectual understanding should become, accompanied by stronger moral integrity and adab in everyday life.

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