Non-Formal Strategies in Managing Conflict and Stress: A Qualitative Study in Islamic Boarding School Educational Institutions

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Abstract:

The study found that pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) employ non-formal mechanisms for managing conflict and stress, which naturally emerge from local cultural and religious values. These strategies include spiritual approaches such as communal prayers, dhikr (remembrance of God), and religious study sessions, as well as interpersonal interventions through familial-style mediation and informal guidance provided by caretakers. Such approaches significantly contribute to fostering a stable environment and promoting the psychological well-being of the students. The active role of *kyai* and *ustadz* as mentor figures who offer personal counsel also plays a vital part in maintaining harmony and mitigating potential conflicts. Furthermore, the close-knit social interactions and routine congregational worship practices strengthen communal solidarity and enhance the emotional resilience of the pesantren community.

Keywords: *Non-formal strategies, conflict resolution, student stress, psychological well-being*

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa pesantren memiliki mekanisme penanganan konflik dan stres yang bersifat non-formal, yang berkembang secara alami dari nilai-nilai budaya dan keagamaan setempat. Strategi tersebut meliputi pendekatan spiritual seperti doa bersama, zikir, dan kajian keagamaan, serta intervensi interpersonal melalui mediasi kekeluargaan dan pembinaan informal oleh para pengasuh. Pendekatan ini berkontribusi besar dalam menciptakan lingkungan yang stabil dan mendukung kesejahteraan psikologis santri. Peran aktif para kyai dan ustadz sebagai figur pembina yang memberikan nasihat secara personal juga menjadi elemen penting dalam menjaga harmoni serta menekan potensi konflik. Selain itu, interaksi sosial yang erat dan rutinitas ibadah berjamaah memperkuat solidaritas sekaligus meningkatkan daya tahan emosional seluruh warga pesantren.

Kata Kunci: *Strategi non-formal, resolusi konflik, stres santri, kesejahteraan psikologis*

INTRODUCTION

Pesantren educational institutions serve not only as centers of religious instruction but also as venues for character formation and personality development among students (Bambang Triyono & Elis Mediawati, 2023). Within the socially dynamic environment of a pesantren, the likelihood of conflict and stress is unavoidable. Conflicts may arise from differences in cultural

backgrounds, individual or group interests, and communication patterns between students (*santri*) and caretakers (*pengasuh*) (Salsabila et al., 2025). At the same time, students often experience stress in response to academic pressure, strict regulations, and the limited availability of facilities and personal space.

In this context, pesantren have developed their own approaches to handling conflict and stress, distinct from the formal strategies employed in mainstream educational institutions. These non-formal strategies encompass culturally and religiously grounded practices such as spiritual activities, family-style mediation, and role modeling by key figures like *kyai* and *ustadz* (Maulinda et al., 2024). Although seldom recorded systematically, these approaches have proven effective in fostering social harmony and enhancing the mental resilience of the pesantren community over the long term.

Nevertheless, few studies have specifically examined how these non-formal strategies are applied in the pesantren setting and how effective they are in managing conflict and psychological pressure (Jurnal et al., n.d.). Accordingly, this study aims to explore in depth the various forms of non-formal strategies employed by pesantren educational institutions to address conflict and stress, adopting a qualitative approach that emphasizes contextual understanding, direct experience, and the lived social practices within the pesantren.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with an intrinsic case study design. This approach was considered the most relevant, as the research focused on a deep understanding of the non-formal strategies that have uniquely developed within the pesantren environment. It allowed the researcher to explore, in a naturalistic manner, the various experiences, perceptions, and social practices of pesantren members in relation to conflict and stress (Pahrurrozi, 2025). The case study design was selected because the study aimed to comprehensively understand the unique context of pesantren as an integrated social, cultural, and spiritual system (Kharir, 2023).

The research was conducted at a pesantren in East Java that combines traditional *salafiyah* education with a modern educational system. This site was chosen due to its complex patterns of social interaction and its conflict-resolution practices grounded in local values. The participants included senior students (*santri*), teaching *ustadz*, dormitory caretakers (*pengasuh*), and the *kyai*. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants with relevant experience and knowledge regarding conflict and stress management mechanisms, as well as active involvement in non-formal pesantren activities (Fakhrur Rozi, 2021).

To obtain rich and contextual data, multiple data collection techniques were employed: semi-structured in-depth interviews, participatory direct observation, and document analysis. The interviews aimed to uncover informants' lived experiences related to forms of conflict, sources of stress, and informal coping strategies (Program et al., 2025). Observations were conducted in the daily life of students and caretakers to understand social interactions and the pesantren

atmosphere. Meanwhile, documents such as activity schedules, meeting notes, and spiritual activity logs were analyzed to supplement the data (Fitriana, 2024).

Data analysis followed a thematic approach, identifying patterns and key themes from interviews, observations, and documentation. The analysis process consisted of three stages: data reduction, presentation (in narrative or matrix form), and interpretation through inductive pattern recognition. To enhance the validity of the findings, the researcher applied data triangulation—both in terms of methods and sources and involved participants in validating the results through member checking (Chasanah & Ningsih, 2023).

The study adhered to established ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained voluntarily from all participants, their identities were kept confidential, and their participation was ensured to be free of coercion or harm. The entire research process was conducted under the academic ethical oversight of the researcher's affiliated institution.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Result
Dynamics of Conflict and Stress in Pesantren

Pesantren Islamic boarding schools built around a residential community—entail complex patterns of social interaction. The diversity of students' cultural, regional, and personal backgrounds provides fertile ground for social dynamics, including potential conflict and stress. These interactions display two sides: cooperation and tension. When communication and tolerance are nurtured, solidarity grows; conversely, unmanaged differences in values and perceptions can evolve into conflict (Cahya et al., 2025).

Conflict in pesantren typically stems from two key sources: heterogeneous student backgrounds and the institution's strict internal rules. Yakin (2023) shows that differences in communication style Javanese students' indirectness versus Sumatran students' directness often spark misunderstandings and tension. Academic competition and rigid schedules likewise fuel conflict when they are not balanced by healthy interpersonal communication. Thus, conflict in pesantren involves more than rule-breaking; it reflects difficulties in bridging cultural diversity.

Stress usually arises as students adapt to rhythms and regulations markedly different from previous experiences (Rahmah et al., 2023). New students often feel pressure from demanding routines and limited family contact. Dormitory conditions that are not conducive to relaxation exacerbate matters. Nomor (2025) notes that psychological strain also manifests physically and emotionally sleep disturbance, anxiety, irritability and accumulated stress can strain relationships and intensify interpersonal conflict.

Students have devised coping strategies. Amallia Putri (2021) shows that expressive writing lowers inner tension and strengthens self-awareness. At Pesantren Nurul Jadid, stress-management training breathing dhikr, spiritual reflection, and open emotional discussions has improved students' emotional well-being. Integrating modern psychological methods with Islamic spirituality is critical to recovery and prevention of chronic stress (Saputra et al., 2025).

In this ecosystem, the kyai plays a pivotal role in maintaining social stability and guiding conflict resolution. Charismatic, values-based leadership fosters reconciliation (Gunawan, Pratama, Hasri & Sohiron, 2022). Yet overly authoritarian styles that stifle dialogue can amplify latent conflict. Structural roles security staff and student advisers—are therefore essential for humane, fair mediation.

Conflict and stress interact in a complex cycle: unresolved psychological pressure can provoke sarcasm, withdrawal, or verbal aggression, while protracted conflict worsens psychological well-being. Stress-management programs in several pesantren break this cycle by improving emotional control (Prasetyo et al., 2023). Traditions of *musyawarah* (deliberation) and culturally rooted problem-solving likewise provide healthy dialogue spaces (Tradisi & Pesantren, 2024).

Digital transformation introduces new challenges. Balancing online learning, social-media use, and conservative traditions (Rahman, 2024) adds stress, while greater geographic diversity heightens the risk of misunderstanding. Pesantren must manage diversity without losing identity or social stability.

Non-Formal Strategies for Managing Conflict and Stress

Intensive interpersonal contact, varied cultural backgrounds, and packed daily schedules make pesantren fertile ground for tension. Unlike modern schools that depend on formal mechanisms such as professional counseling, pesantren rely on informal, locally grounded, spiritual approaches (Kampung, 2025). Conflicts among students or between students and staff are resolved through participatory, family-oriented methods rather than administrative channels. Stress is likewise addressed through religious and communal support, not professional psychological services (Azharghany et al., 2024).

Key non-formal strategies include:

1. Collective *musyawarah*. Often informal and outside official forums, open dialogue in a family atmosphere allows flexible, comprehensive resolution (Aulia et al., n.d.).
2. Charismatic leadership. Kyai calm tensions through personal, morally authoritative advice. Oral, non-coercive communication fosters awareness, not punishment.
3. Informal gatherings. Religious lessons, post-prayer chats, and routine events provide spiritual and social dialogue spaces without bureaucratic mediation.

To handle stress, students draw on collective rituals—*istighotsah*, *tahlil*, *qiyamul-lail*, *sholawat*—that strengthen spiritual and social bonds, fostering peace and solidarity (Pohan et al., 2025). Peer social support likewise reduces stress, especially for newcomers (Ilhamuddin et al., 2024). Islamic-oriented recreation—outdoor dzikr walks, open-air study—offers emotional respite.

These strategies are unwritten yet systematic, transmitted through daily practice and grounded in cultural-religious values (Syakur, 2024). Their strengths are emotional acceptance and rapid internalization; their weaknesses are reliance on key figures and lack of documentation, which hampers evaluation and

replication. Training future spiritual-social leaders is therefore essential, without bureaucratizing the approach (Hasan et al., 2025).

Research Gaps and Study Implications

Pesantren combine religious instruction, character formation, and residential community management. Intense interactions raise the risk of conflict and stress. Yet the literature analyzing pesantren's informal mechanisms remains sparse (Amanullah & Wantini, 2024). Much education research adopts Western administrative or psychological paradigms (Qodri et al., 2024), emphasizing counseling procedures and technocratic interventions while treating local religiosity as secondary. Resulting models are ill-suited to pesantren's spiritually saturated reality.

Another gap is thematic separation: stress studies seldom address conflict dynamics, while leadership or internal-friction studies rarely examine emotional impacts (Rahmah et al., 2023). Many works remain descriptive, ignoring the symbolic meanings of midnight *musyawarah*, dhikr assemblies, or *husnudzan*. Thus, qualitative case or ethnographic approaches are needed to reveal cultural logic and power relations.

The present study fills this gap by capturing experiences of students, teachers, and kyai at an integrated pesantren in East Java. Four dominant non-formal strategies emerged (Sanggar, 2025):

1. Participatory *musyawarah* to quell open conflict.
2. Personal spiritual guidance by the kyai as emotional therapy.
3. Collective rituals (*istighotsah*, *sholawat*) fostering shared calm.
4. Moral exemplification embedding peaceful-resolution values.
   These rely on emotional bonds and religious legitimacy, not written rules.

Implications:

1. Broaden conflict-management theory. Spirituality functions as potent social capital for reconciliation.
2. Link conflict and stress. They form a spectrum: unmanaged conflict triggers chronic stress; prolonged stress fuels latent conflict—challenging linear "conflict-resolution" models.
   Recommendations for pesantren managers
1. Standardize best practices. Document daily *musyawarah* and Islamic-based mediation training for easy replication.
2. Build emotional capacity. Offer empathic-communication workshops for teachers and senior students to pre-empt escalation.
3. Hybridize services. Complement effective informal methods with trained counseling for severe stress, integrating tradition and professional practice.

CONCLUSION

These strategies are not formally codified in institutional policies but rather emerge culturally from spiritual practices, social relationships, and deeply rooted religious values. Several dominant forms of non-formal approaches identified include internal *musyawarah* (deliberative discussion), moral exemplification by the *kyai*, spiritual reinforcement through communal worship activities, and empathy-based communication among members of the pesantren community.

This approach has proven to make a positive contribution to fostering a harmonious and supportive environment, effectively reducing stress potential and managing conflict without resorting to repressive measures. This effectiveness is reinforced by the familial atmosphere and Islamic values that form the core identity of the pesantren. However, in light of the increasing complexity of modern educational challenges such as academic pressure and the growing diversity of students' backgrounds there is a need for more systematic adaptations of these strategies to ensure the pesantren can maintain its social resilience.

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