



Navigating the Dialectic: Religious Identity, Pragmatic Demands, and the Paradox of Educational Choice in Kudus, Indonesia

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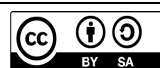
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ABSTRACT

Parental preferences in educational choices in Kota Subdistrict, Kudus Regency, represent a complex dialectic between the preservation of cultural religious identity through Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) and the adaptation of pragmatic instrumental values through public schools. Yet, why parents prefer pesantren despite public schools' greater capacity remains underexplained. This qualitative study analyses the factors shaping these preferences through in-depth interviews with 20 parents and document analysis of educational institution data. The findings reveal three main determinants: (1) The construction of symbolic religious capital as a long-term character investment; (2) The reproduction of the distinctive cultural identity of Kudus santri as a strategy for preserving cultural heritage; and (3) Strategies for protecting the social environment from the negative impacts of globalization through a structured environment. This study contributes to a reconceptualization of citizenship by positioning parents as autonomous agents who reflectively define the meaning of ideal education, while also exposing the social paradox in which the community chooses Islamic boarding schools even though public schools offer greater student admission capacity and accessibility. In response, the study recommends a 'Pluralistic Education Ecosystem' model that emphasizes complementary and synergistic relationships between Islamic boarding schools and public schools, as well as a reconfiguration of more inclusive education policies that support the strengthening of Islamic boarding schools as distinctive educational institutions while ensuring the accessibility and quality of public schools.



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INTRODUCTION

Schools, as formal educational institutions, play a role that far exceeds their basic function as a means of knowledge transfer. They are fundamental in shaping the social, moral, and cultural values of students, influencing how they interact with society. As a cornerstone for developing basic literacy, schools also serve as vehicles for vertical social

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mobility and social integration for individuals from diverse socio-economic backgrounds (Rohman et al., 2024). This educational process is deeply embedded within a socio-cultural context, where societal values, norms, and traditions shape educational orientations and practices.

In the culturally and religiously rich context of Indonesia, Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) represent a unique and holistic educational model. Historically integral to the archipelago's education system for centuries, *pesantren* not only emphasize mastery of Islamic knowledge through classical texts (*kitab kuning*) but also instill values of simplicity, independence, discipline, and community through communal life. This system successfully integrates cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects within a comprehensive framework (Kusumawati & Nurfuadi, 2024). The formal recognition of *pesantren* through Law No. 18 of 2019 has cemented their status as a distinctive and indispensable component of the national education system, moving beyond an alternative to an integral pillar.

Focusing this lens, Kudus Regency in Central Java presents a particularly compelling case study. The *pesantren* tradition here is deeply rooted in the legacy of Sunan Kudus, one of the Wali Songo (Nine Saints) who spread Islam in Java (Zahro et al., 2025). The long history of the spread of Islam in Kudus has shaped distinctive Islamic characteristics (Kharis, 2020), blending religious teachings with local Javanese wisdom into a unique cultural identity. The *pesantren* in Kudus are characterized by a deep systemic integration of a rigorous religious curriculum with living local traditions (Hanapi & Amaluddin, 2025), a synthesis that creates a dynamic harmony between universal Islamic values and unique local culture (Maulidin et al., 2024). This synthesis positions them not merely as schools, but as dual-purpose institutions: central to religious education and crucial for the preservation and regeneration of a distinctive Javanese-Islamic cultural identity.

However, a striking paradox emerges when this profound cultural and religious identity is juxtaposed with quantitative data on educational institutions in Kudus. Data from the Central Java Provincial Statistics Agency for 2025 reveals a surprising configuration in the Kota Subdistrict. The area hosts only 24 Islamic boarding schools, a number far fewer than the 38 public schools. This disparity establishes the central puzzle

of this study, which is to understand why a community with such a strong pesantren-based cultural identity exhibits a quantifiable preference for public schooling. This paradox points to a fundamental dialectic, a tension between the preservation of cultural-religious identity, symbolized by the pesantren, and the pursuit of pragmatic-instrumental capital. This pursuit is often associated with public schools, which are perceived as better equipped to prepare students for global competitiveness in the evolving eras of Industry 4.0 and Society 5.0 (Mutammam et al., 2024), a perception fueled by broader concerns about the need for educational modernization in the face of globalization (Rifai, 2017; Suradi, 2018).

The existing literature on Islamic education has provided valuable insights, exploring areas such as curriculum integration (Kusumawati & Nurfuadi, 2024) and community economic empowerment (Arifin & Setiawan, 2019). However, these studies fail to resolve the central paradox observed in communities like Kudus: the tension between a deep cultural-religious identity and the pressures of pragmatic modernity, as evidenced by the quantitative disparity in school choices. The core theoretical gap this research addresses is therefore not merely a lack of local data, but the inadequate conceptual framework for understanding how parents navigate the tension between investing in symbolic religious capital, such as identity and values, and acquiring pragmatic-instrumental capital, such as competitive skills and economic security. This dialectic between symbolic and pragmatic imperatives forms the central analytical conflict that prior research has yet to resolve. This study aims to bridge this gap by conducting a qualitative analysis of the educational preferences of parents in Kudus. Preliminary findings illustrate this tension: one pesantren-parent prioritized religious character formation, viewing education as a long-term project of building moral fortitude, while another pesantren-parent emphasized the protected social environment of the pesantren as a decisive factor. These narratives suggest that for a segment of parents, non-material values can outweigh the quantitative dominance of the public school system. The study will therefore empirically identify the key determinants, spanning symbolic, pragmatic, and cultural dimensions, that shape their choices and analyze how the negotiation between these competing imperatives resolves into a final decision. By doing

so, this research offers insights into the observed paradox and enhances understanding of educational choice within culturally rooted communities undergoing modernization.

Therefore, this study is designed to resolve this paradox by investigating the complex dialectic of educational preferences in Kudus. This research is guided by three primary objectives: to identify the core determinants, spanning symbolic, pragmatic, and cultural dimensions, that shape parental preferences between pesantren and public schools; to analyze how negotiations between these determinants explain the observed quantitative disparity; and to examine how these preferences reconfigure the meaning of educational rights and citizenship in a modernizing society. Through this investigation, the study develops a novel conceptual framework for understanding educational choice within culturally rooted communities undergoing modern transformation.

METHOD

A qualitative case study approach was selected as it is uniquely suited to explore the underlying reasons for the social paradox identified in the introduction: why a community with a strong pesantren identity shows a quantitative preference for public schools (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the values, tensions, and decision-making processes that statistics alone cannot reveal. Kota Subdistrict was chosen as the research site as it epitomizes this tension, hosting a high concentration of both modern public schools and historically significant pesantrens. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation of key perspectives. The final sample consisted of 20 parents with the following characteristics:

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants by Educational Choice

	Characteristic	Pesantren Choice	Public School Choice	Total
Gender	Mother	6	6	12
	Father	4	4	8
Socioeconomic Status	Low income	3	2	5
	Middle income	5	6	11
	High income	2	2	4
Education Level	Basic education	4	3	7
	Secondary education	4	5	9
	Higher education	2	2	4
Residence	Urban	6	7	13
	Rural	4	3	7

Source: Primary data (2025).

As shown in Table 1, the sample included 12 mothers and 8 fathers, with a balanced distribution across socioeconomic backgrounds and education levels.

Inclusion criteria required that all participants: (1) had at least one child currently enrolled in either a pesantren or public school at secondary level, (2) were primary decision-makers in educational choices, and (3) had resided in Kudus Regency for minimum of 10 years.

Data collection was conducted from June to September 2025 using two complementary qualitative methods. This approach aligns with the principle of triangulation in qualitative inquiry, which seeks to produce a more complete and contextualized understanding of a phenomenon by examining it from multiple vantage points (Denzin, 2012).

1. In-depth interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 20 parents using a validated interview guide covering three main themes: 1) cultural and religious values in education, 2) economic and practical considerations, and 3) children's aspirations and autonomy. Each interview lasted 30-60 minutes and was audio recorded with the participants' consent and professionally transcribed for analysis.
2. Document Analysis: We systematically analysed the following documents to contextualize interview data and verify enrolment trends:
 - a. Official education statistics from the Central Java Statistics Agency (2025)
 - b. Student admission quotas from two public secondary schools and four Islamic boarding school branches (2020-2025)

Data analysis proceeded inductively through an iterative process of reading, reflection, and discussion, following the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We began by immersing ourselves in the interview transcripts, reading them repeatedly to become thoroughly familiar with parents' narratives. Through this close engagement, we identified recurring concepts and patterns in how parents explained their educational choices, which we documented through memoing and preliminary coding. These patterns gradually coalesced into broader thematic categories, such as the emphasis on religious character formation that evolved into our "symbolic religious capital" theme. We continually refined these themes by checking them against the original transcripts to

ensure they accurately represented participants' perspectives, often returning to the raw data to verify our interpretations. The entire process was characterized by collaborative sessions where research team members debated coding decisions and thematic interpretations until reaching consensus, ultimately organizing our validated themes into the coherent analytical framework presented in this study.

To enhance the credibility of our findings, we employed data triangulation by comparing perspectives from parents who made different educational choices (pesantren vs. public school) complemented by methodological triangulation through checking emergent interview themes against trends in official school enrollment statistics. The study adhered to strict ethical protocols including written informed consent from all participants, confidentiality assurance through pseudonymization of identifiers, and clear communication of the right to withdraw throughout the research process. Analytical rigor was further strengthened through iterative team discussions where coding decisions and thematic interpretations were debated until consensus was achieved.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

Quantitative Findings: Disparities in Educational Capacity

Data on student enrollment quotas at the upper secondary level in Kudus Regency (2020-2025) reveals significant disparities between state-run and community-run educational institutions. According to the Central Java Statistics Agency (2025), Kudus Regency hosts 199 Islamic boarding schools, demonstrating the strong presence of Islamic education in this region. However, our analysis focusing on Kota Subdistrict shows that public schools maintain substantially higher institutional capacity compared to Islamic boarding schools at the upper secondary level. As shown in Table 2, the capacity disparity is particularly striking within the research area.

Table 2

Comparison of Student Admission Quotas for Senior Secondary Education in Kota Subdistrict, Kudus, for the Period 2020-2025

Educational Institution	Average Annual Admission Quota
Public School	
SMA Negeri 1 Kudus	320 students
SMA Negeri 2 Kudus	350 students
Islamic Boarding School	

Yanbu'ul Qur'an Tahfidh Boarding School for Boys	150 students
Yanbu'ul Qur'an Tahfidh Boarding School for Girls	100 students
Yanbu'ul Qur'an Tahfidh Boarding School for Boys in Bejen	150 students

Source: School administration data (2025).

This quantitative profile highlights the central paradox of this study: despite Kudus Regency hosting 199 Islamic boarding schools (Central Java Statistics Agency, 2025), which reflects the strong cultural religious foundation of this area, public schools in Kota Subdistrict maintain dominant capacity in student intake at the upper secondary level compared to the limited number of pesantrens offering this educational level in the research locus.

Qualitative Findings: Parental Perspectives on Educational Choice

Theme 1: Religious Character Formation as Primary Priority

Parents who chose pesantren unanimously emphasized religious character development as their primary educational objective, prioritizing moral and spiritual formation alongside academic learning. One parent articulated this balance: "Academic achievement alone is insufficient without strong religious foundation. We want our children to become not just smart individuals, but pious human beings" (PP-04). Another parent highlighted the integrated approach of pesantren education: "In pesantren, religious values are integrated into daily life, not just taught as theory" (PP-07). This theme transcended socioeconomic differences, with all 10 pesantren parents expressing similar value-based considerations in their educational choices.

Theme 2: Observed Behavioral Changes

Parents reported significant positive behavioral changes in their children following enrollment in pesantren, with eight parents specifically noting improvements in discipline and responsibility. One mother described this transformation: "After entering pesantren, my son became more disciplined and independent. The structured environment helped him develop self-control and time management skills" (PP-02). Another parent observed marked changes in social behavior: "My daughter's attitude improved dramatically; she's more respectful to elders and responsible in daily activities" (PP-09). These observable personal developments served as strong validation for parents' educational choices, reinforcing their decision through tangible outcomes in character development.

Theme 3: Protective Environment as a Decisive Factor

Concerns about negative social influences emerged as a significant factor, with seven parents explicitly choosing pesantren for its protective environment. One father articulated this motivation: "We chose pesantren to protect our children from harmful social trends and peer pressure. The homogeneous environment ensures they grow up with shared values and moral guidance" (PP-01). Another parent emphasized the contrast with mainstream education: "In public schools, children are exposed to various influences that may contradict our family values. The pesantren environment provides a protective bubble during their formative years" (PP-05).

Theme 4: Pragmatic Considerations for Public School Choice

Parents who selected public schools emphasized practical educational advantages, with all 10 participants highlighting instrumental benefits. A working mother explained her value calculations: "Public schools provide better preparation for university entrance and career opportunities. We need to balance religious values with practical life skills for global competition" (PS-03). Another parent valued curricular diversity: "The national curriculum offers wider subject choices and better facilities for science and technology. This diversity allows children to explore various academic interests" (PS-08). Economic considerations also influenced decisions, as one parent noted: "Public schools are more affordable when considering additional costs of pesantren education, while still providing quality instruction" (PS-06). These pragmatic assessments reveal different educational priorities that prioritize career preparation and economic efficiency.

Discussion

The Educational Paradox in Kudus

This study crystallizes a central paradox within Kudus's educational landscape. Quantitative findings reveal the institutional dominance of public schools in Kota Subdistrict, where the admission quotas for SMA Negeri 1 and SMA Negeri 2 Kudus far exceed the combined quotas of local Islamic boarding schools (Table 2). This configuration aligns with the state's provision of widespread and accessible education. Qualitatively, however, a significant segment of parents consciously chooses pesantren, institutions with limited capacity, based on non-instrumental priorities. This divergence can be understood as a local manifestation of a global tension, where the homogenizing

pressures of a world culture of education, which often promotes standardized models of schooling (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Ramirez, 2012), are met with localized resistance and the assertion of distinct cultural identities.

The choice of pesantren over state schools, therefore, is not merely a consumer preference but a strategic investment in a specific form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Parents are prioritizing what can be termed religious cultural capital, comprising piety, moral discipline, and mastery of Islamic knowledge, over the academic and institutional capital primarily offered by the national school system. This value-driven preference challenges conventional, supply-oriented paradigms of educational rights (Hefner, 2008). It demonstrates that for these parents, the actualization of the right to education is fundamentally about autonomy in determining the meaning and purpose of education itself. This reflective capacity to define educational values aligns with concepts of transformative citizenship that emphasize political and deliberative agency (Mukmin & Sihaloho, 2024). This paradox, observed in a region with a strong pesantren tradition rooted in the legacy of Sunan Kudus (Zahro et al., 2025), underscores a complex dialectic where the community navigates the tension between preserving its distinctive identity and engaging with modernization pressures, a challenge that resonates with the adaptive transformations discussed in contemporary pesantren studies (Mutammam et al., 2024).

Fundamental Dynamics of Educational Preference

This study identifies four interrelated dynamics that explain the educational paradox in Kudus. These dynamics reveal how parental decision-making operates through a complex calculus where non-material values frequently override conventional instrumental considerations.

Symbolic Religious Capital as Long-term Investment

The findings reveal that religious character formation constitutes the foundational priority for parents choosing pesantren education. This preference was consistently articulated across socioeconomic backgrounds, with parents emphasizing that academic achievement alone remains "insufficient without strong religious foundation" (PP-04). For these parents, education represents more than knowledge transfer; it encompasses the

holistic formation of moral and spiritual character that will guide their children throughout life.

This conscious prioritization can be theorized as strategic investment in what (Bourdieu, 1986) conceptualized as symbolic capital, here specifically manifested as religious cultural capital. Unlike institutionalized cultural capital embodied in formal qualifications, this religious capital comprises embodied dispositions including piety, moral integrity, and deep religious knowledge that parents perceive as transcendent assets with eternal significance. As (Fahrudin, 2025) notes in his study of religious character management, Islamic educational institutions prioritize the development of moral fortresses through disciplined environments that are difficult to replicate in public school settings.

Consequently, parents reframe what might appear as economic or opportunity costs into necessary long-term investments in spiritual security. This valuation system fundamentally reorders conventional educational hierarchies where academic credentials typically dominate. The persistence of this preference pattern despite the quantitative dominance of public schools suggests that for a significant segment of the Kudus population, symbolic religious capital retains exchange value within their cultural economy that transcends material advantages.

Cultural Identity Reproduction in a Modernizing Society

Parental narratives consistently highlighted observable behavioral transformations in children enrolled in pesantren, particularly noting increased discipline, respect for elders, and personal responsibility (PP-02, PP-09). These behavioral changes represent more than individual character development; they signify the successful acquisition of a specific cultural habitus that embodies the values and dispositions of Kudus's distinctive santri culture.

In theoretical terms, this process constitutes cultural reproduction through educational choice. As (Husen & Husni, 2025) argue, pesantren serve as bastions of cultural identity against educational homogenization. This local phenomenon reflects a global pattern where, as (Anderson-Levitt, 2003) observes, worldwide models of schooling often promote cultural standardization, yet inevitably encounter local resistance

and adaptation. In this context, pesantren emerges as a deliberate counterinstitution for preserving local cultural identity against homogenizing pressures.

By choosing pesantren, parents engage in strategic cultural preservation amid modernization pressures. This represents neither nostalgic traditionalism nor resistance to change, but rather a conscious effort to ensure intergenerational transmission of cultural identity perceived as vulnerable to erosion. The choice for pesantren thus becomes a mechanism for maintaining cultural distinctiveness, illustrating how global educational trends are invariably mediated through local cultural logics.

Navigating Globalization Through Protective Environments

Parental anxiety about negative social influences in an increasingly globalized and digitally connected society constitutes a third prominent dynamic. Parents explicitly cited concerns about "harmful social trends and peer pressure" (PP-01) as decisive factors in choosing pesantren, with several describing the institution as a "protective bubble" (PP-05) during their children's formative years.

This preference pattern reflects a strategic response to social fragmentation in modern society. As Abdul Latif et al. (2021) demonstrate in their study of child-friendly schools integrated with pesantren values, structured educational environments function as moral sanctuaries that maintain value cohesiveness and protect against negative social excesses. The pesantren's bounded community offers psychological security by reducing exposure to conflicting value systems.

The significance of this protective function has intensified in the digital age, where parents perceive unprecedented challenges in managing children's exposure to global media and social networks. In this environment, pesantren is valued not merely as an educational institution but as a moral ecosystem that can safeguard adolescent development. This dynamic illustrates how globalization produces not only integration but also defensive localization, with parents seeking insulated environments that can preserve traditional values against perceived cultural fragmentation.

The Other Side of the Paradox: Instrumental Values in Public School Choice

Completing the analytical picture, parents who choose public schools articulate a decisively different rationality centered on human capital development and

socioeconomic mobility. Their narratives emphasize "better preparation for university entrance and career opportunities" (PS-03), "wider subject choices and better facilities for science and technology" (PS-08), and the economic rationality of public schools being "more affordable" (PS-06) while providing quality instruction.

This perspective aligns with what James (Coleman, 1988) identified as human capital theory, where education is conceptualized as an investment in knowledge and skills that enhance economic productivity and future earnings. As Mutammam et al., (2024) observe in their analysis of pesantren adaptation to Society 5.0, modern educational institutions must balance tradition with the imperative to prepare students for technological advancement and economic participation. From this viewpoint, public schools appear better aligned with instrumental objectives through their national curriculum and established pathways to higher education.

The coexistence of these diametrically opposed rationalities, value-based versus instrumental, within the same community constitutes the core of the Kudus educational paradox. This is not merely a difference in personal preference but represents a fundamental societal dilemma: whether to prioritize the preservation of distinctive cultural-religious identity or to secure perceived advantages within increasingly competitive socioeconomic systems. The simultaneous operation of both logics illustrates the complex negotiation between cultural preservation and economic adaptation that characterizes modernizing religious communities globally.

Reconceptualizing Educational Rights and Citizenship

The coexistence of these divergent educational preferences in Kudus challenges conventional supply-side paradigms of educational rights. Findings indicate that for many parents, meaningful educational rights encompass not only access to state institutions but also the autonomy to choose educational pathways aligned with their cultural and religious values.

These parental choices demonstrate what can be understood as an exercise of cultural agency in educational decision-making. This phenomenon resonates with (Bourdieu, 1986) theory of capital, revealing how religious values operate as a significant form of symbolic capital that shapes educational preferences in this specific context. The consistent prioritization of religious character formation over instrumental advantages

suggests that parents evaluate educational options through a value-based rationality that transcends conventional economic calculations.

This value-based approach to educational choice has implications for understanding citizenship in culturally diverse societies. As (Ramirez, 2012) world society perspective suggests, global education models inevitably undergo local mediation through distinctive cultural frameworks. The persistent preference for pesantren illustrates how communities negotiate their relationship with modernization pressures, asserting cultural sovereignty through educational choices while participating in broader societal structures.

These findings advance a more nuanced understanding of educational rights that recognizes how citizenship encompasses not only rights to access state services but also rights to cultural self-determination. The Kudus case demonstrates that in pluralistic societies, meaningful educational rights must accommodate diverse conceptions of valuable knowledge and successful education.

This study ultimately demonstrates that educational preferences in Kudus represent a form of reflective citizenship centered on non-material capital, where parents actively negotiate between cultural preservation and modernization through their educational choices. The findings reveal that for a significant segment of this community, the actualization of educational rights is fundamentally about the autonomy to determine what constitutes meaningful education, prioritizing symbolic religious capital and cultural identity alongside instrumental advantages. The broader theoretical implications for understanding educational rights in pluralistic societies, along with policy recommendations, will be elaborated in the conclusion.

CONCLUSION

This study has illuminated the complex educational paradox in Kudus, where significant parental preference for capacity-limited pesantren persists alongside the state's provision of widely accessible public schools. Through qualitative analysis, we have identified three fundamental dynamics driving pesantren choice: the accumulation of symbolic religious capital as long-term investment, the reproduction of cultural identity in a modernizing society, and the strategic selection of protective environments against

globalization's perceived risks. Concurrently, the instrumental rationality underlying public school preference highlights the pragmatic calculations facing families in an increasingly competitive economic landscape. These findings challenge conventional paradigms of educational rights by demonstrating how parents emerge as autonomous agents who reflectively define the meaning of ideal education through their choices.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. As a qualitative case study focused on one subdistrict, the findings' transferability to other socio-cultural contexts in Indonesia may be limited. The study offers less developed understanding of the pragmatic-instrumental calculations behind public school choices, as the perspectives of parents who selected public schools were not as thoroughly explored as those who chose pesantren. These limitations suggest several productive directions for future research: (1) comparative multi-site studies across different Indonesian regions to test the transferability of these findings; (2) incorporating student perspectives through participatory research methods for more holistic understanding; (3) large-scale quantitative surveys to quantify the prevalence of these preference patterns; and (4) more in-depth investigation of the pragmatic-instrumental rationalities underlying public school preferences.

In response to these findings, we propose a "Pluralistic Education Ecosystem" model that moves beyond binary conceptions of educational choice. This framework recommends: redefining educational quality indicators to include character and spirituality dimensions; strengthening regulatory frameworks that recognize local wisdom-based education models; and developing mechanisms that facilitate meaningful parental autonomy while ensuring educational quality standards.

The Pluralistic Education Ecosystem model offers a viable pathway for transcending the tradition-modernity dichotomy in Indonesian education, ensuring that the nation's education system can develop both competitive skills and strong cultural-religious character for future generations.

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