

Developing Santri Leadership Character through Pesantren Organizations at Ar Raudhatul Hasanah Pesantren

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Abstract

This study aims to describe the structure and mechanisms of the student organization at Ar Raudhatul Hasanah Pesantren in Medan, analyze the process of developing santri leadership character through the Ar Raudhatul Hasanah Student Organization, and identify the leadership character values formed through santri involvement in pesantren based organizational activities. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through observation, in depth interviews, and documentation involving pesantren caregivers, supervising teachers, organizational administrators, and santri who participated in organizational activities. Data analysis was conducted through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Theoretically, this study uses Social Learning Theory to explain the formation of behavior through observation, imitation, reinforcement, and social interaction. It also uses the concept of Servant Leadership to understand leadership as trust, responsibility, and service. The expected findings indicate that the student organization plays an important role as a leadership cadre formation space through the delegation of trust, habituation of discipline, practice of responsibility, decision making, problem solving, and exemplary conduct. The character values formed include trustworthiness, discipline, responsibility, independence, honesty, courage, cooperation, social concern, and service orientation. This study is expected to contribute to the development of a pesantren based leadership character education model and to serve as a practical reference for strengthening student organizations in Islamic educational institutions.

Keywords: Leadership Character, Pesantren, Student Organization

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Introduction

The leadership crisis among Indonesian youth has become one of the important issues in human resource development during the last decade. Young people, who should become the successors of national leadership, are facing serious challenges, including low participation in social activities, weakening collective resilience, declining interest in organizational involvement, and the emergence of leadership behavior that does not yet reflect integrity, responsibility, and social concern. This condition shows that the problem of youth leadership is not only related to technical ability in leading, but also to the character foundation that shapes ways of thinking, ways of behaving, and ways of making decisions.

Survey data from Statistics Indonesia show that the youth participation index in organizational activities decreased by 12.4 percent compared with 2019 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2023). This decline can be read as a symptom of weakening social learning spaces for young people, because organizations are important arenas for training responsibility, communication, cooperation, decision making, and sensitivity to collective interests. When youth involvement in organizations decreases, their opportunities to learn leadership through direct practice also become more limited. This phenomenon becomes even more concerning when various social spaces show cases of abuse of power by young leaders, whether in the form of weak responsibility in office, low public ethics, lack of transparency, or a tendency to use leadership positions for personal interests. Mulyasa emphasizes that deviation in leadership practice is often rooted in weak character education from an early age, especially when learners are not accustomed to internalizing the values of discipline, trustworthiness, responsibility, and social concern in daily life (Mulyasa, 2022).

In this context, education has a strategic role in developing the leadership character of young people. Education should not be directed only toward the mastery of knowledge and academic skills, but must also touch personality formation, moral awareness, social maturity, and the ability to take part in community life (Mhd. Habibu Rahman, 2025). One educational institution with a long tradition in character formation is the pesantren. As the oldest Islamic educational institution in Indonesia, the pesantren functions not only as a place for the transmission of religious knowledge, but also as a space for personality development, social habituation, and the cultivation of leadership values. Pesantren shape santri through a life that integrates learning, worship, organization, interaction, and service.

The uniqueness of the pesantren lies in its holistic educational system. Dhofier explains that the pesantren has an educational tradition that integrates intellectual, spiritual, moral, and social aspects into one unified system of life (Dhofier, 2022). Unlike formal educational institutions that generally limit the learning process to classroom hours, the pesantren applies a full day educational pattern. Santri live in an environment regulated by values, rules, discipline, and exemplary conduct. Therefore, education takes place not only through classroom teaching, but also through worship habituation, interaction with teachers, relationships among santri, organizational activities, dormitory management, and various social and religious activities.

The twenty four hour educational system in pesantren enables character formation to take place intensively and continuously. Every santri activity, from waking up, performing congregational prayer, studying, joining organizational activities, maintaining cleanliness, leading activities, to participating in disciplinary evaluation, becomes part of the character education process. In Nata's view, the pesantren can be understood as a life laboratory because it provides a real social environment in which santri can experience, practice, and reflect on life values directly (Nata, 2023). In this life laboratory, santri do not only learn about leadership conceptually, but also experience the process of becoming leaders through duties, responsibility, supervision, correction, exemplary conduct, and the experience of managing others.

One important medium in developing santri leadership character is the pesantren organization. The student organization provides opportunities for learners to plan programs, divide tasks, solve problems, communicate with members, express ideas, make decisions, and

account for the trust given to them. Through organization, santri are trained not only to become objects of education, but also active subjects who help regulate collective life in the pesantren environment. Organizational activities also bring santri into complex social situations, such as differences of opinion, conflicts of interest, pressure of responsibility, disciplinary demands, and the need to prioritize the common good.

Raudhatul Hasanah Pesantren, located in Medan, North Sumatra, is one of the modern pesantren with strong attention to the development of santri leadership. Since its establishment in 1982, this pesantren has been known as an Islamic educational institution that combines the strengthening of religious knowledge, general education, language development, discipline, and student organization development. Over time, Raudhatul Hasanah Pesantren has produced many alumni who have served in various fields, including education, da'wah, social service, bureaucracy, and community leadership. This shows that the pesantren is not oriented only toward academic achievement, but also toward the formation of leadership capacity and social responsibility among santri.

The Raudhatul Hasanah Student Organization, known as OPRH, serves as the main forum for developing santri leadership. This organization is managed by santri under the guidance of teachers and pesantren caregivers. Through OPRH, santri are given space to carry out leadership functions directly, such as managing daily activities, coordinating organizational divisions, preparing work programs, maintaining discipline, implementing language activities, mobilizing religious activities, and developing activities related to interests and talents. This pattern shows the existence of a systematic cadre formation process, because santri are not only given knowledge about leadership, but also entrusted to practice it in pesantren life (Profile of Raudhatul Hasanah Pesantren 2024).

In the context of OPRH, the development of santri leadership character can be seen through several important processes. First, habituation, namely the cultivation of leadership values through daily routines that require discipline, punctuality, responsibility, and obedience to rules. Second, exemplary conduct, namely character formation through the figures of the kiai, caregivers, teachers, and senior administrators who become behavioral models for santri. Third, the delegation of trust, namely the involvement of santri in organizational positions that require them to learn task management, decision making, and problem solving. Fourth, supervision and evaluation, namely mechanisms for correcting santri leadership behavior so that they understand the consequences of every action. Fifth, social reflection, namely the santri experience in dealing with organizational dynamics, differences in member character, conflict, and the need to build cooperation.

Studies on character formation in pesantren have been widely conducted. Zuhriy found that character education at Gontor Pesantren takes place through five main pillars: worship, discipline, independence, exemplary conduct, and ukhuwah (Zuhriy, 2021). This finding shows that santri character is not formed instantly, but through continuous habituation in a structured environment. Meanwhile, Sulaiman and Fadillah revealed that student organizations at Darussalam Pesantren play a significant role in improving leadership soft skills, such as communication, cooperation, responsibility, conflict management, and decision making (Sulaiman & Fadillah, 2023). These two studies show that pesantren have great potential as spaces for leadership character formation.

However, research that specifically examines the mechanism of leadership character formation through pesantren organizations using an in depth case study approach remains relatively limited. Previous studies have more often focused on character education in general, santri discipline, or the role of pesantren in moral development. Studies that focus on how student organizations operate as instruments for leadership character formation still need to be developed, especially in the context of Raudhatul Hasanah Pesantren, which has a structured and distinctive student organization model. This distinctiveness is important to study because each pesantren has different cultures, cadre formation systems, mentoring patterns, and organizational traditions.

Theoretically, the development of santri leadership character in pesantren organizations can be analyzed through the social learning theory developed by Albert Bandura. This theory emphasizes that human behavior is formed through observation, imitation, reinforcement, and interaction with the social environment. In the pesantren context, santri learn to become leaders not only through advice or formal lessons, but also through observing the behavior of kiai, teachers, senior administrators, and peers. They observe how a leader behaves, speaks, makes decisions, corrects members, carries out trust, and solves problems. These experiences are then imitated, practiced, improved, and strengthened through mechanisms of appreciation, correction, evaluation, and social recognition within the organization (Schunk, 2023).

In addition to social learning theory, the concept of servant leadership is also relevant for understanding the development of santri leadership character. Greenleaf, as explained by Northouse, places the leader as a servant who prioritizes the interests of others, builds empathy, develops members, and fosters a civilized community (Northouse, 2022). This concept is closely related to Islamic leadership values, which view leaders as bearers of trust and servants of the community. In the pesantren tradition, leadership is not understood merely as power, position, or authority, but as moral responsibility to serve, guide, protect, and provide benefit to others. Thus, the student organization can become an important space for cultivating the value of *khadim al ummah*, namely the leader as servant of the community.

Based on the description above, this research is important for understanding in depth how the pesantren organization plays a role in developing santri leadership character at Raudhatul Hasanah Pesantren. The focus of this study is not only on the existence of organizational structure, but also on social processes, educational values, mentoring patterns, leadership experiences, and forms of character that are formed through santri involvement in the organization. With a case study approach, this research is expected to describe the reality of leadership education in a more contextual, empirical, and in depth manner.

This study aims to describe the structure and mechanisms of the pesantren organization at Raudhatul Hasanah, analyze the process of developing santri leadership character through pesantren organizations, and identify the leadership character values formed through santri involvement in pesantren organizations. These values may include trustworthiness, responsibility, discipline, honesty, independence, courage in decision making, ability to cooperate, social concern, exemplary conduct, and service orientation. Thus, this study is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of a pesantren based leadership character education model, as well as practical contributions for pesantren managers in designing student organization programs that are more systematic, reflective, and relevant to the leadership needs of Indonesian youth.

Literature Review

1. The Concept of Leadership Character

Leadership character is a combination of moral quality and managerial competence embedded in a leader. (Lickona, 2022b) defines character as an inner disposition that can be relied upon to respond to situations in a morally good way. This disposition consists of three interactive components: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. In the context of leadership, (Intan Astina Dewi, 2025) adds that the character of an effective leader includes integrity, empathy, resilience, and the ability to inspire others to achieve shared goals.

In the Islamic perspective, leadership character cannot be separated from the concept of *khalifah fil ardh*, or leader on earth, which contains the mandate to manage and preserve life based on the principles of justice, consultation, and public benefit (Langgulung, 2021). Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, as the primary model, demonstrated four fundamental traits of leadership: *shiddiq*, meaning honesty; *amanah*, meaning trustworthiness; *tabligh*, meaning communicative ability; and *fathonah*, meaning intelligence. These traits form the foundation of Islamic leadership character (Rivai & Arifin, 2023).

2. Pesantren Organizations as a Medium for Leadership Education

Pesantren have a long tradition of developing internal organizations as a means of fostering santri leadership. According to (Mastuhu, 2022), pesantren organizations function as miniature societies that provide santri with real experience in managing various aspects of community life. Student organizations generally include a management structure consisting of a chairperson, vice chairperson, secretary, treasurer, and various divisions or sections that handle specific areas such as security, cleanliness, language, sports, and arts.

The study by (Arifin & Suhartini, 2023) reveals that modern pesantren organizations have adopted contemporary management principles without abandoning traditional pesantren values. This integration creates a unique model called pesantren based leadership development, which combines spiritual, intellectual, and managerial aspects in one comprehensive educational system. Furthermore, (Muhakamurrohman, 2022) emphasizes that santri involvement in pesantren organizations provides a highly effective learning by doing experience in shaping leadership character because santri directly face real situations that require decision making, negotiation, and problem solving.

3. Social Learning Theory and Character Formation

Social Learning Theory developed by Bandura becomes the main theoretical framework for understanding the mechanism of santri leadership character formation. According to (Faiza Azhari, 2025), this theory emphasizes that human behavior is formed through reciprocal interaction among personal factors, behavior, and environment, known as reciprocal determinism. In the pesantren context, social learning takes place through four mechanisms: attention to the model, retention of information, reproduction of behavior, and motivation or reinforcement to maintain behavior.

In addition, Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, as cited in (Kolb & Kolb, 2022) , is also relevant for explaining how santri learn leadership through a cycle of concrete experience, reflection, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Involvement in pesantren organizations provides concrete experience as the starting point of meaningful leadership learning. The combination of these two theories provides a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms of leadership character formation within the context of pesantren organizations.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method. The selection of this approach is based on the research objective to explore in depth the phenomenon of santri leadership character formation in the natural context of pesantren organizations (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The case study method was chosen because it enables the researcher to conduct an in depth investigation of a bounded system in a real life context (Yin, 2024). The research site is Raudhatul Hasanah Pesantren, located on Letjen Jamin Ginting Street, Paya Bundung Village, Medan Sunggal District, Medan City, North Sumatra. This pesantren was selected purposively because it has an established student organization system, has operated for more than four decades, and has produced many alumni who have served in leadership positions in society.

Research informants were selected through purposive sampling with the following criteria: first, they were directly involved in the management or implementation of pesantren organizations; second, they had at least two years of experience in the pesantren; and third, they were willing to become research informants. The informants included one pesantren leader, one KMI or curriculum director, three student organization supervisors, five OPRH leaders and administrators, and five senior santri who had previously served as administrators. The total number of informants was fifteen. Data collection techniques included three main methods. First, in depth interviews were conducted using a semi structured interview guide that had been validated by two Islamic education experts. Second, participatory observation was carried out for two months, from March to April 2026, by directly observing student organization activities, coordination meetings, work program implementation, and daily santri activities. Third,

documentation included organizational bylaws, management structures, activity reports, and administrator performance evaluation documents.

Data analysis used the interactive model of Miles, (Miles et al., 2023), which consists of three activity flows: data condensation, namely the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming data; data display, namely organizing data in the form of matrices, graphics, and narratives; and conclusion drawing and verification. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation, method triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing with two fellow researchers.

Results

1. Structure and Mechanisms of the Pesantren Organization at Raudhatul Hasanah

The findings show that Raudhatul Hasanah Pesantren has a comprehensive and hierarchically structured student organization. The Raudhatul Hasanah Student Organization, or OPRH, is the parent body of the student organization that oversees various divisions and activity units. The OPRH structure consists of a general chairperson, vice chairperson, general secretary, general treasurer, and eight main divisions: Security Division, Teaching Division, Language Division, Cleanliness and Health Division, Information and Da'wah Division, Sports Division, Arts Division, and Cooperative and Kitchen Division.

The pesantren leader, as a key informant, explained the organizational mechanism as follows:

The student organization in this pesantren is not merely a complement, but an integral part of the educational system. We designed OPRH as a forum where santri learn to lead in real terms. Every fifth grade santri, equivalent to the second year of senior high school, is required to become an administrator, so that all of them gain organizational experience. (W/PP/01, March 12, 2026)

The organizational mechanism runs through an annual cycle that begins with administrator selection, inauguration, work program preparation, implementation, monthly evaluation, and end of term accountability reporting. Each division has clear duties and functions as well as measurable indicators of success. This finding is in line with the study by (Arifin & Suhartini, 2023), which found that modern pesantren have adopted structured management principles in managing student organizations.

In addition to OPRH, there is also a room based organization, namely mudabbir or mudabbirah, which is responsible for managing dormitory life. Each room has a room leader who coordinates daily activities, from waking up, preparing for congregational prayer, maintaining room cleanliness, to evening study time. This system creates levels of leadership from the smallest level, the room, to the pesantren as a whole, so that every santri has the opportunity to develop leadership capacity gradually.

2. The Process of Developing Santri Leadership Character

Based on data analysis, the process of developing santri leadership character at Raudhatul Hasanah takes place through three main stages that are interrelated and cyclical.

First Stage: Habituation

Habituation is the fundamental stage in developing leadership character. From the beginning of their entry into the pesantren, santri are accustomed to strict time discipline, independence in managing personal needs, and obedience to pesantren regulations. One organization supervisor stated:

New santri must immediately adapt to the rhythm of the pesantren. They wake up at 4:00 a.m., perform the dawn prayer in congregation, and then follow all activities until 10:00 p.m. At first it is indeed difficult, but after several months this discipline becomes an embedded habit. From here, the foundation of leadership character begins to form. (W/PO/02, March 18, 2026)

This habituation process takes place consistently for twenty four hours within the pesantren environment. This finding strengthens (Lickona, 2022) argument that character

formation requires consistency and continuity in its application. The pesantren environment, which has the character of a total institution, as discussed by Goffman in (Dhofier, 2022), provides ideal conditions for habituation because all aspects of santri life are integrated into one controlled system.

Second Stage: Modelling

Exemplary conduct from the kiai, teachers, and seniors becomes a crucial factor in the process of developing leadership character. Santri observe, internalize, and imitate the leadership behavior patterns demonstrated by exemplary figures in the pesantren. This process is consistent with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes the role of observational learning in behavior formation (Schunk, 2023).

The OPRH chairperson for the 2025 through 2026 period gave testimony about the influence of exemplary conduct:

I learned a great deal about leadership by observing how our teachers managed the pesantren. They did not only give orders, but also came down directly to work with santri. When there was a major activity, the teachers stayed up late to prepare everything. That is what I tried to apply when leading OPRH. (W/KO/04, March 25, 2026)

Exemplary conduct in the pesantren context is not limited to managerial aspects, but also includes spiritual and moral examples. The kiai, as the central figure of the pesantren, becomes the main role model whose behavior, attitude, and words are continuously observed by all santri. This is in line with the concept of *uswatun hasanah* in Islamic education, which places exemplary conduct as the most effective educational method (Nata, 2023).

Third Stage: Gradual Responsibility

This stage is the peak of the leadership character formation process, in which santri are given increasing responsibility gradually according to their grade level. First and second grade santri serve as members who follow the guidance of seniors. Third and fourth grade santri begin to be trusted as coordinators of room level activities. Fifth grade santri occupy OPRH administrator positions and lead various pesantren activities. Sixth grade santri serve as mentors and evaluators for junior administrators.

The KMI director explained the philosophy behind this gradual delegation of responsibility as follows:

We do not immediately place santri in strategic positions. There is a gradual process that must be passed through. Santri must first be able to lead themselves, then lead their rooms, and only after that are they trusted to lead a larger organization. The principle is that a good leader must first be a good follower. (W/DK/03, March 20, 2026)

This finding is consistent with Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, which emphasizes the importance of direct experience as the basis of learning. Gradual responsibility allows santri to repeatedly experience the cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation at increasingly complex levels. In addition, this finding confirms Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, which states that optimal learning occurs when individuals are given challenges slightly above their actual ability with adequate support (Shabani, 2022).

3. Leadership Character Values Formed

Data analysis identified six main leadership character values formed through santri involvement in pesantren organizations at Raudhatul Hasanah.

First, integrity. This value is formed through a strong emphasis on honesty and consistency between words and actions. Organizational administrators are required to become role models in enforcing rules, including when there is no supervision from the pesantren authorities. A santri administrator in the security division stated that the task of applying discipline to peers trained them to be consistent and impartial.

Second, responsibility. Every administrator carries the trust to implement assigned duties and work programs. The periodic evaluation system conducted by organization supervisors encourages administrators to remain responsible for the performance of the division they lead. This value is internalized through the Islamic concept of *amanah*, which teaches that every position is a responsibility that will be accounted for before Allah, the Almighty.

Third, independence. Pesantren organizations encourage santri to be able to make decisions independently in managing programs and solving problems. Although supervisors are always ready to provide direction, administrators are trained to seek solutions on their own before consulting others. This independence is one of the *Panca Jiwa Pondok*, or the five spirits of the pesantren, which forms the basic educational philosophy at Raudhatul Hasanah.

Fourth, communication skills. Organizational administrators must routinely communicate with various parties: fellow administrators, santri, teachers, and pesantren leaders. Weekly coordination meetings, speeches before all santri, and mediation of conflicts among santri intensively train interpersonal and public communication skills.

Fifth, conflict management. The heterogeneous pesantren environment, with santri from various regional and cultural backgrounds, naturally creates the potential for conflict. Organizational administrators, especially those in the security division, are trained to become mediators who are able to resolve disputes wisely based on the principles of consultation and justice.

Sixth, social sensitivity. Organizational administrators are required to be sensitive to the needs and problems of santri. The *mudabbir* system, which places administrators in the midst of santri life, trains social sensitivity and empathy, which are important elements of servant leadership.

These six leadership character values are not formed separately, but are integrated into one holistic pesantren education system. This finding strengthens (Mulyasa, 2022) perspective that effective character formation requires a comprehensive approach involving cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects simultaneously. In the context of Raudhatul Hasanah Pesantren, these three aspects are accommodated through classroom learning, habituation of Islamic values, and organizational practice.

Conclusion

Based on the research findings and discussion, three main conclusions can be drawn. First, the pesantren organization at Raudhatul Hasanah has a systematic and comprehensive structure, with OPRH as the parent body that oversees eight main divisions and is supported by the *mudabbir* system at the room level. This structure is designed to provide the widest possible opportunity for santri to develop their leadership potential at various levels. Second, the process of developing santri leadership character takes place through three interrelated stages: habituation, which instills discipline and independence as a foundation; modelling from the *kiai*, teachers, and seniors, which becomes a behavioral reference for leadership; and gradual responsibility, which enables santri to develop leadership competence progressively according to their level of maturity. Third, the leadership character values formed through pesantren organizations include integrity, responsibility, independence, communication skills, conflict management, and social sensitivity. These six values are integrated into one holistic educational system that combines intellectual, spiritual, and social dimensions. This study provides a theoretical contribution in the form of a pesantren based leadership character formation model that can enrich the literature on character education and Islamic leadership. Practically, this model can be adapted by other Islamic educational institutions in designing santri leadership development programs.

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