

Policy Innovation Model in Developing Child-Friendly Islamic Boarding Schools: An Islamic Education Management Perspective

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Article Info

Article history:

Received: Jan 29, 2026

Revised: March 15, 2026

Accepted: April 18, 2026

Keywords:

Policy innovation;
Child-friendly Islamic boarding schools;
Islamic education management

ABSTRACT

Formulating a child-friendly Islamic boarding school system (pesantren) has become a crucial challenge in today's Islamic education, especially in addressing the conflict between traditional hierarchical disciplinary culture and the growing demands of child rights-oriented education. The purpose of this paper is to examine how innovation in policymaking is used to achieve child-friendly pesantren education. This research employs a qualitative multiple case study design, involving three Islamic boarding schools in Pasuruan Regency, Indonesia, selected as information-rich and representative cases of ongoing institutional transformation. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 18 informants (leaders, teachers, students, and external stakeholders); observation; and document analysis, using an interactive qualitative data analysis model. The results show that policy innovation in child-friendly pesantren does not unfold in a straight line or through an administrative process; rather, it occurs through a socio-organizational ecosystem. This ecosystem is composed of the dynamic interaction among four interconnected elements: leadership, student participation, organizational culture transformation, and stakeholder support. Leadership operates through religious-symbolic legitimacy and gradual communication; stakeholder engagement reinforces institutional capacity; cultural adaptation mediates the integration of humanistic values within disciplinary traditions; and student participation sustains inclusive practices. This study enhances the discourse by introducing a socio-organizational ecosystem model of policy innovation in faith-based education, which expands current policy innovation frameworks by integrating religious legitimacy and cultural negotiation as fundamental dimensions. These findings offer theoretical and practical guidance in developing sustainable child-friendly policy innovations in Islamic boarding schools.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The pesantren is one of the oldest Islamic learning institutions in Indonesia, and is strategically important for the character, morality, and spiritual formation of the young generation (Sari et al., 2025; Sirojuddin & Pramitha, 2025; Kinoshita, 2023; Baharun et al.). Apart from serving as places where Islamic knowledge is transmitted, the pesantren functions as a socio-educational institution where students live in

dormitory facilities in an environment of intensive interaction (Maulana et al., 2022; Islamic et al., 2023; Salim et al., 2024). As they develop further, pesantrens are viewed not only as conventional learning institutions but also as modern social institutions, contributing to community development and religious identification in Indonesia (Firmansyah et al., 2025; Huda, 2024). Thus, *pesantrens* have been placed in a position to meet educational requirements while preserving their unique religious and cultural peculiarities.

In the international arena, ensuring the realization of children's rights is increasingly prominent in education-related discussions, particularly in relation to humanistic or child-friendly education. Child-friendly education requires ensuring an environment where children are free to develop physically, mentally, and socially (Chu et al., 2025; Rizka et al., 2024). In child-friendly education, the subject matter concerns the child, and he or she is viewed as having the right to be part of, be free from, and be shown respect in the learning process. Nevertheless, it should be noted that implementing such concepts in pesantren education raises contradictions. According to Nadlifuddin (2024), some pesantrens maintain hierarchical and disciplinary models of education that may clash with the concept of participatory and humanistic pedagogy. The observed issue reveals a structural contradiction between the existing system of authority and normativity, grounded in *kyai*-based leadership and disciplinary approaches, and the norms and values of child-friendly education. This dilemma poses an important academic challenge for researchers seeking to understand institutional change in education within cultural and religious contexts.

Several research projects have investigated changes in pesantren from different angles, including educational administration, curriculum design, and organizational development. Some of these research studies include Muafiah et al. (2022), who emphasize the role of institutions in developing child protection policies, and Idris et al. (2023), who reveal that organizational leadership, culture, and human resource preparedness are key factors in successful child-centered learning programs. However, despite their relevance and significant findings, all these research projects fail to explain the policy innovation process at pesantren.

In this connection, Hasibuan (2026) highlights that the development of child-friendly pesantrens is closely associated with innovative policies that incorporate Islamic educational values and child protection concepts. However, no previous research has adequately analyzed the dynamics of how such innovative policies emerge, evolve, and change within the peculiar socio-cultural setting of pesantrens. This theoretical and practical lacuna is important because, without addressing these issues, initiatives to advance child-friendly education will remain confined to the realm of normativity and programming. Most of the literature on the issue has focused on the implementation of child-friendly educational programs or policies in pesantren, but little consideration has been given to policy innovation as a process. In particular, there is a paucity of work on the role of institutional negotiations, organizational adaptations, and interactions among internal and external forces in the innovation of policy. The implication is that an analysis of the innovation process is necessary to explain what happens in pesantren.

Theoretically, policy innovation may be considered not only as the process of bringing something new into existence but also as policy change driven by learning, actor interactions, and institutions (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). In discussing policy innovation within pesantren, the theory of policy innovation must be further expanded, incorporating theoretical frameworks on institutional change and organizational transformation. This is because, within such theories, values, norms, and power have been discussed as determinants of innovation adoption. Policy innovation in pesantren must be examined as a process of negotiating a shift from a conventional education paradigm to an open and humane one (Amini et al., 2025; Salamuddin et al., 2025).

Based on this conceptual framework, creating child-friendly pesantren not only involves pedagogical changes but also requires policy innovation that aligns organizational culture, leadership, and stakeholder relations with child protection concepts. Contextualizing transformation is necessary to understand how such organizational change must account for the unique features of pesantren as educational institutions, grounded in cultural, religious, and social aspects. In this regard, the present study focuses on the policy innovation process associated with the construction of child-friendly pesantren. The specific aim of this research is twofold: first, it tries to explain policy innovation processes in relation to the creation of child-friendly faith-based institutions. Second, it provides a conceptual framework for understanding the role of institutional negotiation in managing organizations in faith-based sectors, which can contribute to discussions of organizational policy theory in educational contexts.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The research approach used in this study is a qualitative multiple-case study to comprehensively examine how policy innovation is formulated and implemented in child-friendly Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). A case study design was selected because the research aims to explore a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident. Compared to other qualitative approaches, the case study is more appropriate

because it enables an in-depth, context-sensitive analysis of institutional processes, actor interactions, and policy dynamics within pesantren environments. This study adopts a multiple case logic to allow analytical comparison across cases and to strengthen the robustness of findings through cross-case patterns (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

This research was conducted in three pesantren in Pasuruan Regency, East Java: Dalwa 2 Blawi Pandean Islamic Boarding School, Al-Imam Ghozali Bangil Islamic Boarding School, and Syaikhuna Al-Zain Islamic Boarding School. These cases were selected purposively based on a replication logic in multiple case study designs, where each pesantren represents a strategically relevant case for examining policy innovation. Specifically, the selection reflects a combination of typical and information-rich cases, as these institutions (1) implement a boarding-based education system, (2) demonstrate ongoing efforts toward child-friendly policy development, and (3) exhibit organizational dynamics that allow observation of innovation processes. This case selection enables analytical generalization by capturing shared patterns and contextual variations in policy innovation across pesantren.

The study was conducted over 4 months, from June 2025 to September 2025. During this period, data collection activities included iterative observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies. The prolonged engagement in the field allowed the researcher to capture the dynamics of policy processes, interactions among actors, and institutional changes related to child-friendly education practices in pesantren.

Selection of research participants was guided by a purposive sampling technique, with participants directly involved in the policy process within the pesantren selected. The sample comprised 18 respondents made up of pesantren administrators/leaders (5), teachers/ustadz (6), students/santri (5), and stakeholders (2). Respondents who qualified for this selection were those involved in either education administration or student activities, while those not involved in either were automatically disqualified. The process was to continue until information saturation and power were achieved through themes, and no new findings were obtained (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025; Robinson, 2023).

Data collection was conducted through interviews, non-participant observation, and documentary analysis. The semi-structured interview sessions lasted approximately 45-90 minutes and discussed issues surrounding policy innovation and child-friendly education. The observations were on everyday educational routines, interactions between teachers and learners, disciplining methods, and areas where participants engage in the pesantren setting. The documentation analysis included approximately 15 institutional documents, including policy guidelines, student regulations, program reports, and training materials related to child protection and educational management (Khan et al., 2025; Surawy-Stepney et al., 2023).

To validate and enhance data reliability, the triangulation approach has been used, including source and method triangulation. Findings from leaders, teachers, students, and stakeholders have been compared, and the interview findings have been verified through observation and documentation. Moreover, the researcher used member checking, peer debriefing, and an audit trail to enhance credibility. Reflexivity, on the other hand, ensured the critical examination of the researcher's positionality and any biases associated with the research process (Schlunegger et al., 2024; Vivek et al., 2023). Interactive qualitative data analysis, as presented by Miles and Huberman, has been adopted for analyzing the data. It ensures terminological consistency in analyzing the data. Interactive qualitative data analysis involves three major steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion verification/concluding (Miles et al., 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Ethical considerations were upheld by following the appropriate measures in conducting research, such as obtaining consent from all the sources and ensuring confidentiality and voluntariness, among others. All sources were made aware of the study's objectives. The identities of all the sources were kept anonymous. Institutional information was also kept confidential. It is in this manner that this research aims to contribute a deeper and methodologically robust understanding of the process of policy innovation in developing child-friendly Islamic boarding schools and the factors influencing its successful implementation within the context of humanistic Islamic education management.

3. RESULTS

The results of this study were obtained through in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis at three Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Pasuruan Regency: Dalwa 2 Blawi Pandean Pasuruan Islamic Boarding School, Al-Imam Ghozali Bangil Pasuruan Islamic Boarding School, and Syaikhuna Al-Zain Islamic Boarding School. These findings suggest that innovations in developing child-friendly pesantrens result from a gradual process of institutionalization carried out through interactions among various elements, including leadership, students, pesantren culture, and external parties. From the analysis of collected data, four major themes were identified, each consisting of several subprocesses.

Use of symbolic power and religious legitimacy

Findings from fieldwork show that *kyais'* involvement is crucial to legitimizing policy changes by integrating concepts of children's best interests into Islamic teachings. "After introducing new regulations regarding student welfare, the *kyai* told us that taking care of students is a form of *amanah* (responsibility). That made teachers more accepting." (Respondent 3, Ustadz). "If the *kyai* has already said it is part of Islamic teaching, we follow it. It does not feel like a new rule, but rather part of our tradition." (Respondent 6, Santri). Institutional meetings frequently used references to religious texts and moral obligations when introducing policy changes.

Communication and gradual strategy

Leadership does not force change suddenly but introduces it gradually through internal dialogue and discussion. "We did not directly change everything. We talked about it step by step with the teachers so that they could see the point." (Respondent 1, Pesantren Leader). "In the beginning, some teachers were against it, but after several discussions, they started accepting the new process." (Respondent 4, Ustadz). The above process of progressive communication was observed during routine meetings and other discussion forums, where the leadership left room for suggestions before making official decisions. Leadership works by adopting two distinct strategies of legitimization and communication. This leads to the adoption of innovative policies, thus creating an enabling environment for learning among all students regardless of their background.

Expansion of participatory spaces in learning

Data indicate that students are increasingly involved in classroom interactions and in the evaluation of learning. "Now we are always invited to share our views during lessons, and the teachers pay attention much more." (Respondent 5, Santri). "We always aim at creating an open class environment where the students would not feel awkward about talking." (Respondent 7, Ustadz). From our observations, it was evident that dialogic interaction occurs more often than the one-sidedness found in conventional lessons, suggesting that the attempt to create an open class environment has been effective.

Institutionalization of student voice through organizations

Student participation is also facilitated through student organizations and forums that function as channels for expressing aspirations. "Through the student organization, we can propose activities and provide suggestions on dormitory regulations." (Respondent 8, Student). "We receive input from student representatives during program evaluation meetings." (Respondent 2, Islamic Boarding School Administrator). Documents such as meeting minutes and activity reports confirm the existence of a structured student engagement mechanism. Student participation is enacted through both informal classroom interaction and formal organizational channels that enable the articulation of student perspectives, fostering a more inclusive environment and encouraging students to express their views on school policies and activities.

Clash between discipline-based culture and human-based culture

From the data analysis, it was found that cultural transformation does not occur by replacing the previous value system with a new one, but rather through negotiation. "Discipline is definitely important, but we practice it through persuasion." (Respondent 9, Ustadz). "We thought the regulation was so strict, but now we realize why they make such regulations through explanations from the teacher." (Respondent 10, Santri)

Change through training and internal adaptation.

Training events and internal dialogues lead to changes in teachers' perceptions of education. "After going through the training concerning the protection of children, we began to reconsider how we communicate with the students." (Respondent 11, Ustadz). "External trainers were able to show us that disciplining and caring can complement each other." (Respondent 12, Stakeholder). Workshops and training sessions have been documented to demonstrate this subtheme through consistent capacity-building programs. The Organizational culture has been transformed through gradual interpretation of values, aided by training and internal adaptation enabled by stakeholder involvement.

Development of capacity through external cooperation

External stakeholders are involved in the process through training and technical assistance on child-friendly policies and educational administration. "We have received training from external bodies regarding child-friendly schooling." (Respondent 2, Pesantren Administrator). "Our responsibility is to help pesantrens create better conditions for their learners." (Respondent 13, External Stakeholder). There is evidence of collaboration with external organizations through program documentation.

Resource and legitimacy support

Stakeholders can also lend legitimacy and additional resources to support policy implementation, including financial support, knowledge, and connections within the network, thereby increasing the program's impact. "We can easily implement our new programs because of the support we receive from outside." (Respondent 1, Pesantren Leader). "If the government is involved, it means that the program has a more systematic process." (Respondent 14, Stakeholder). It was observed that pesantrens with a strong external network tend to adopt a more systematic approach to policy implementation. The support provided by the stakeholder helps with policy implementation by reinforcing institutional and organizational capacity.

The empirical results above show that innovation in policymaking for developing child-friendly Islamic boarding schools occurs through interrelated processes involving leadership approaches, student involvement, culture negotiation, and stakeholder engagement. Each of these factors operates in a particular way, thereby contributing to the policy-making process.

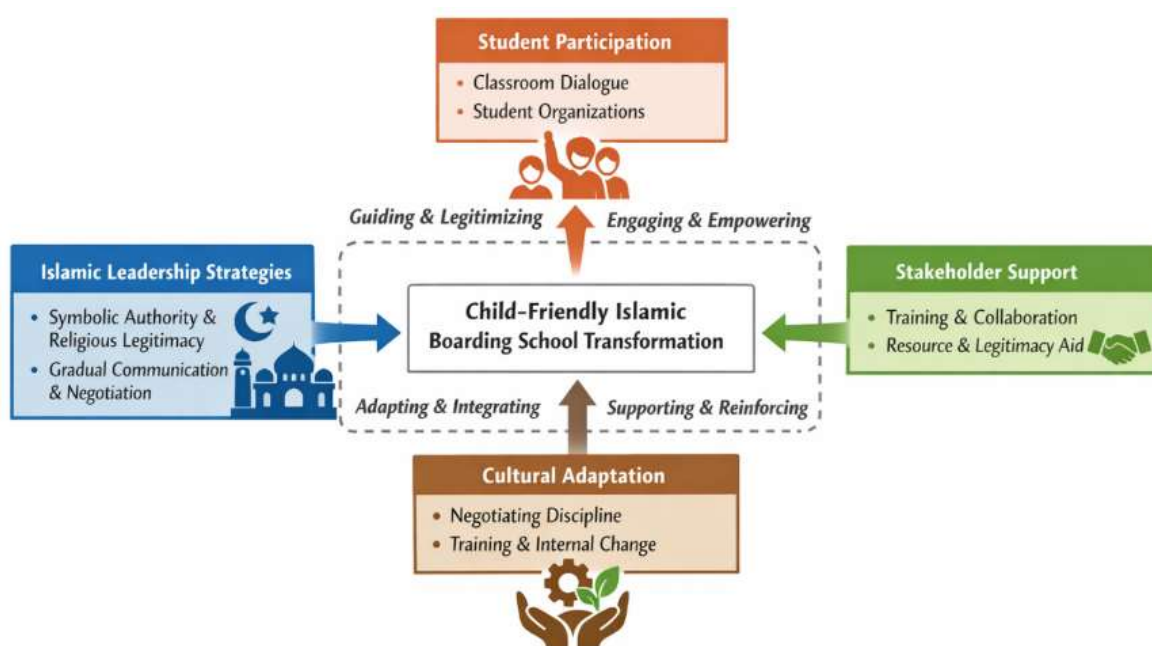


Figure 1. Policy innovation in child-friendly Islamic boarding schools

Figure 1. Represents a conceptual model of policy innovation in the development of child-friendly Islamic boarding schools as a systemic and interactive transformation process. At the center of the model is the transformation of Islamic boarding schools into child-friendly institutions, which is influenced by four main factors: Islamic boarding school leadership, student participation, organizational culture transformation, and stakeholder support. These factors operate based on certain mechanisms: Leadership: Symbolic Legitimacy and Gradual Communication; Participation: Dialogue Space and Student Associations; Culture: Value Negotiation and Humanistic Approach; Stakeholders: Resources and Collaboration. These four are interconnected and form a dynamic process that collectively encourages the integration of child-friendly education principles into the Islamic boarding school education system.

4. DISCUSSION

The results indicate that pesantren leadership is essential in both formal authority roles and as a mediator that facilitates the implementation of innovation. Contrary to common views of transformational leadership that focus on the visionary, motivational, and organizational aspects of leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006), the present study's results highlight the significance of religious charisma for the effectiveness of pesantren leadership. The *kyai* authority combines the institutional and symbolic aspects, enabling innovations, including child-friendly approaches, to be framed as religious duties. The present finding enriches contemporary leadership theories by showing that, in religious organizations, the effectiveness of leadership depends on the ability to incorporate innovations within religious perspectives rather than relying solely on management. Previous research strengthens the importance of leadership influence in Islamic boarding schools (Idris et al., 2023; Muafiah et al., 2022). This demonstrates that the process of

implementing innovations is linked to religious norms. Thus, religious leadership in pesantren provides another perspective for understanding leadership in other contexts.

The results further reveal that student participation is not a spontaneous process but is facilitated by structural and cultural opportunities within the organization. Frameworks of child-friendly education emphasize participation as a general principle (Lacrampe, 2017); however, the current study highlights that, in the context of pesantren schools, student participation can occur only when the organization's hierarchy creates structural opportunities for dialogue. This finding indicates a drawback of the universally applicable child-centered education framework, which assumes that participation can be easily implemented. However, based on the results of this study, participation can be considered a consequence rather than an implementation process. The participation process in pesantren schools is influenced by past changes in leadership style and organizational culture, which can vary significantly from those in other educational institutions and impact the effectiveness of child-centered education programs (Amini et al., 2025; Salamuddin et al., 2025).

The results of this research demonstrate that transformations in pesantren organizational culture occur gradually through value negotiation rather than abrupt cultural shifts, between traditional values of disciplinary practices and humanistic values of education. The above findings are consistent with organizational change theory in general, as they demonstrate that a fundamental transformation of organizational culture cannot occur without a corresponding value transformation (Burke, 2002). However, in contrast to the above view, the present research demonstrates that value negotiation occurs within the framework of cultural traditions and religion. In addition, the above-mentioned finding is consistent with Nadlifuddin (2024), who stresses the need for flexibility in creating child-friendly pesantren. At the same time, the aforementioned study extends the discussed perspective by demonstrating that cultural transformation can be facilitated only through value negotiation and the continuous reinterpretation of the discipline concept from coercion to dialogue. The discussed approach contradicts several modernization theories that assume a conflict between innovation and tradition.

Stakeholder support functions as an enabling structure that reinforces and accelerates internal institutional change. As suggested in the collaborative governance literature (Afandi et al., 2023; Dai & Azhar, 2024), external agents offer resource and knowledge inputs, as well as legitimacy. However, this research highlights that stakeholder support is most effective when aligned with leadership behavior and organizational culture. It appears that external factors alone are not sufficient to drive innovation in policy practices. Rather, the success of such influences depends on their integration into the socio-cultural environment of the pesantren.

Rather than viewing the four factors as separate variables, the findings can be synthesized into a socio-organizational ecosystem model of policy innovation. This is because leadership serves as a catalytic and legitimate actor, ensuring stakeholder involvement, whereas stakeholder involvement provides legitimacy and resources that lead to organizational culture transformation; organizational culture transformation provides conditions for student involvement, which makes the policy innovation sustainable. This comprehensive perspective enhances understanding of policy innovation by showing that it is neither linear nor factor-driven, but rather a relational, iterative network of interactions. Such a model expands policy innovation theory (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993) by incorporating cultural, religious, and organizational dimensions that are particularly salient in faith-based educational institutions, thereby providing a more comprehensive framework for understanding how these factors influence policy outcomes in such contexts.

Theoretically, the contributions in this paper are: An application of policy innovation theory within the domain of faith-based educational institutions, with emphasis on religious legitimacy and cultural negotiation; the demonstration of the limitations of universally applicable Western theories (such as transformational leadership) in particular localities; and a proposal for a new concept of policy innovation ecosystem involving interrelated aspects of leadership, culture, participation, and stakeholders. The practical implications of the research are the following: An attempt to implement a child-friendly pesantren policy must involve *kyais* acting as cultural brokers of change rather than as administrative officers. Attention to the process of slow cultural adaptation and to the creation of institutionalized mechanisms for student participation is recommended.

5. CONCLUSION

The current study suggests that policy innovation for creating child-friendly Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) should be understood as a relational and ecosystemic approach rather than merely as administrative innovation. The results of the current research indicate that innovation occurs through the interplay of various components, including leadership, stakeholder engagement, organizational culture transformation, and students' engagement in the innovation process. Each of these four aspects is not

separate from the others; rather, they are interconnected. The first uses its legitimacy and guidance to facilitate innovation; the second helps the organization strengthen its capacity; the third transforms the organization from within; and the last maintains inclusivity.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of policy innovation and Islamic education management literature by demonstrating that innovation in faith-based institutions is mediated by symbolic-religious authority and value-based negotiation processes, thus revealing the contextual limitations of conventional Western frameworks. Practically, the findings suggest that policymakers and educational leaders should prioritize culturally embedded strategies, such as engaging *kyais* as key agents of change, promoting gradual organizational transformation, strengthening structured student participation, and aligning external stakeholder support with internal institutional values. These insights provide a more context-sensitive foundation for designing and implementing sustainable child-friendly policies in Islamic boarding schools. The current study has certain limitations, including the fact that the investigation involves only a few cases in a particular regional setting. The qualitative methodology used also enables generalization of findings from such investigations. Future research should consider conducting comparative studies for other regions to establish the variations that might occur when applying the same innovation policies to child-friendly Islamic boarding schools. Longitudinal studies could also be conducted to assess the effectiveness of this policy innovation over the long term.

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